

RAKXAPHON

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONE / Yutaka Izubuchi

volume 3





RAHXEPHON

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Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi

RAHXEPHON

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RAHXEPHON NOVEL VOLUME 3

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Ohnogi Hiroshi

Author. Born in 1959, Tokyo.

Made his debut in 1982 as a scriptwriter for *Super Dimensional Fortress Macross*. Other key works include *Gundam Z* and *Magical Play*. Joined the *Rahxephon* staff at the "14th Movement" and was subsequently charged with its novelization.

Yamada Akihiro

Original illustrations and design. Born in 1957, Kochi Prefecture.

Key works include *The Record of the Lodoss War: The Lady of Pharis*, (with Mizuno Ryo, Kadokawa Publications), and *The Twelve Kingdoms* (with Ono Fuyumi, Kodansha X Bunko Publications).

Sano Hirotoshi

Mechanical director. Born in 1962, Fukuoka Prefecture.

Worked as a mechanical director on *Mobile Fighter G Gundam* and *The Vision of Escaflowne*. Often referred to as the "Robot Artist."

Kanno Hiroki

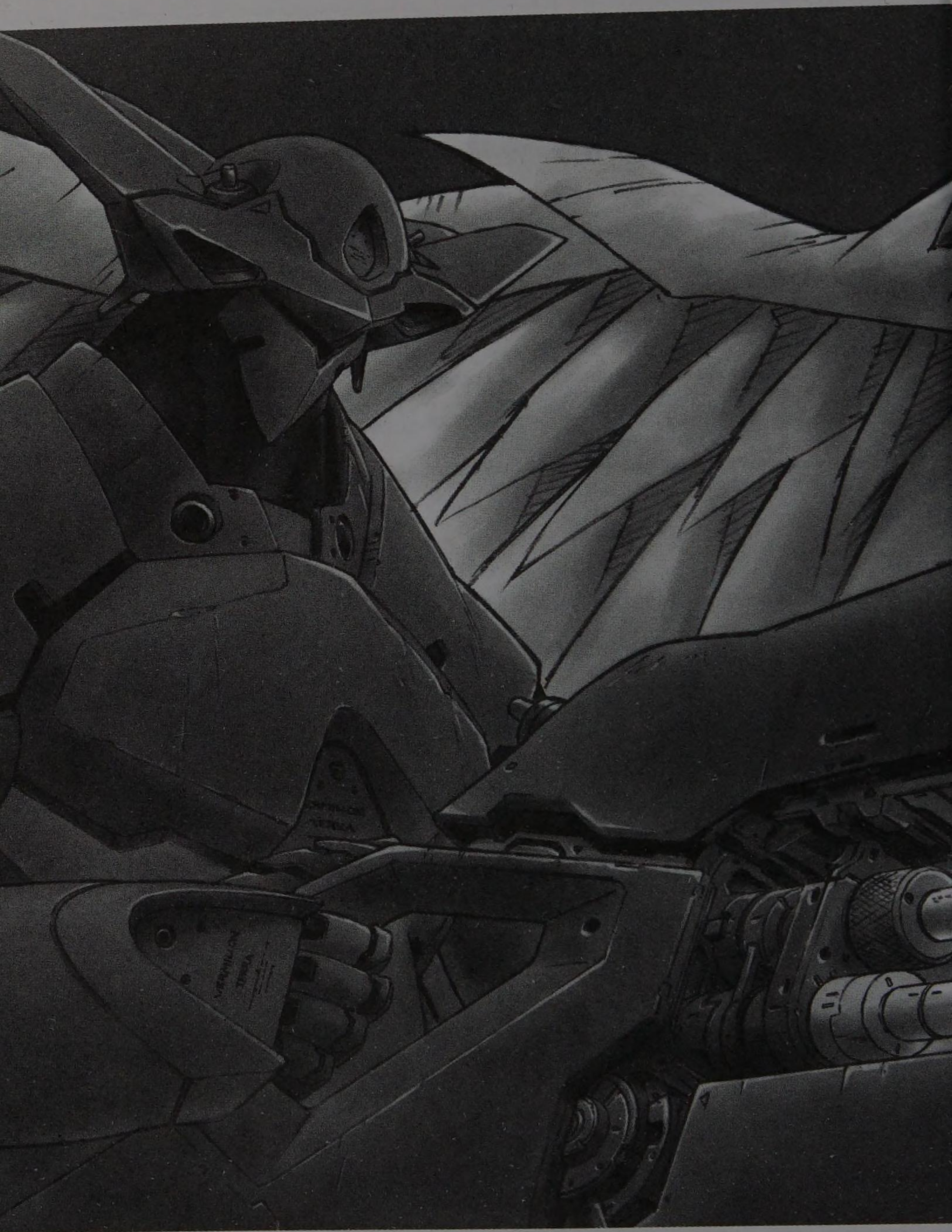
Animation character design. Born in 1965, Iwate Prefecture.

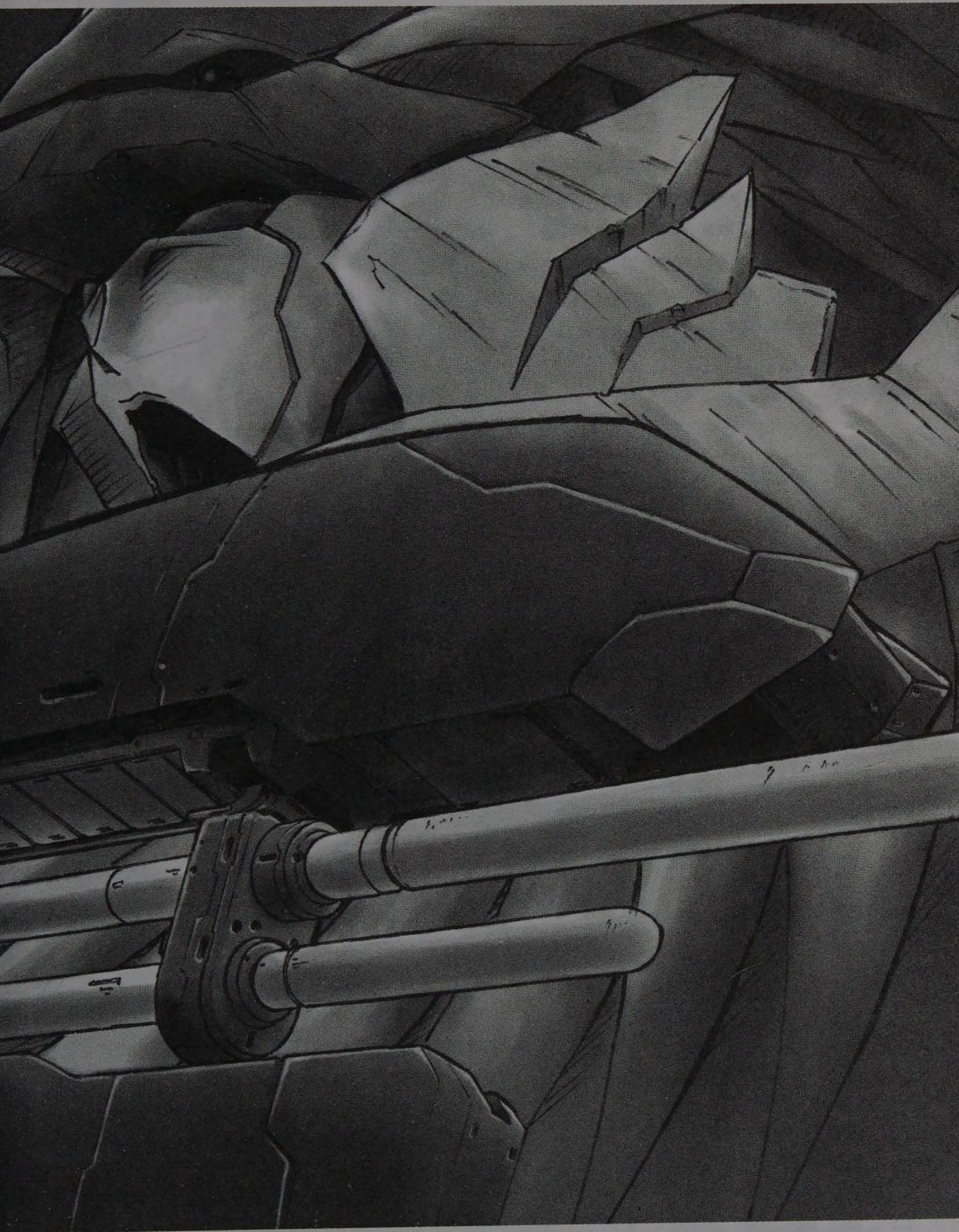
Previous key works include *Cowboy Bebop* and *Hiwou Senki*.

Sato Michiaki

Mechanical design. From Tokyo.

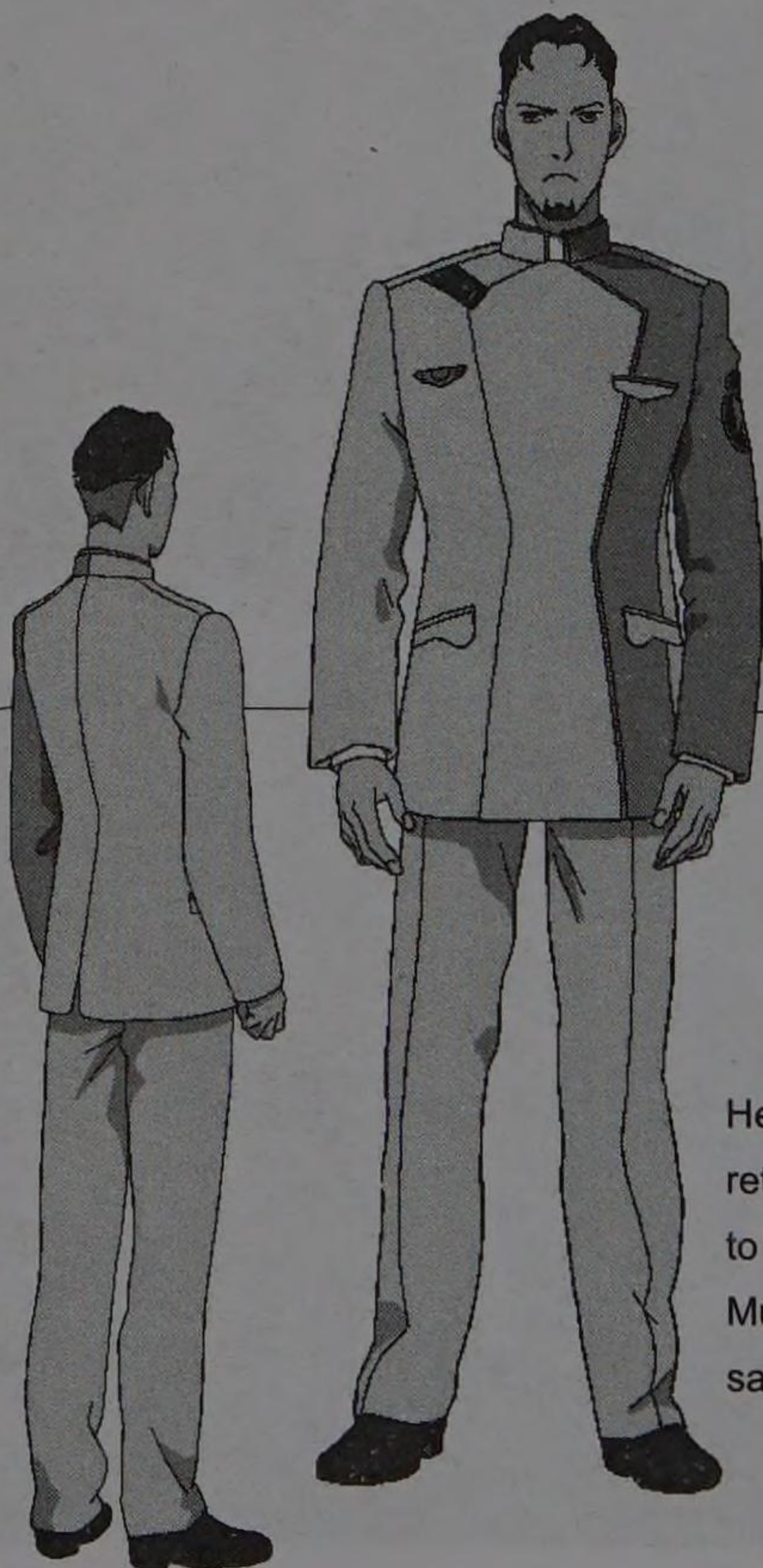
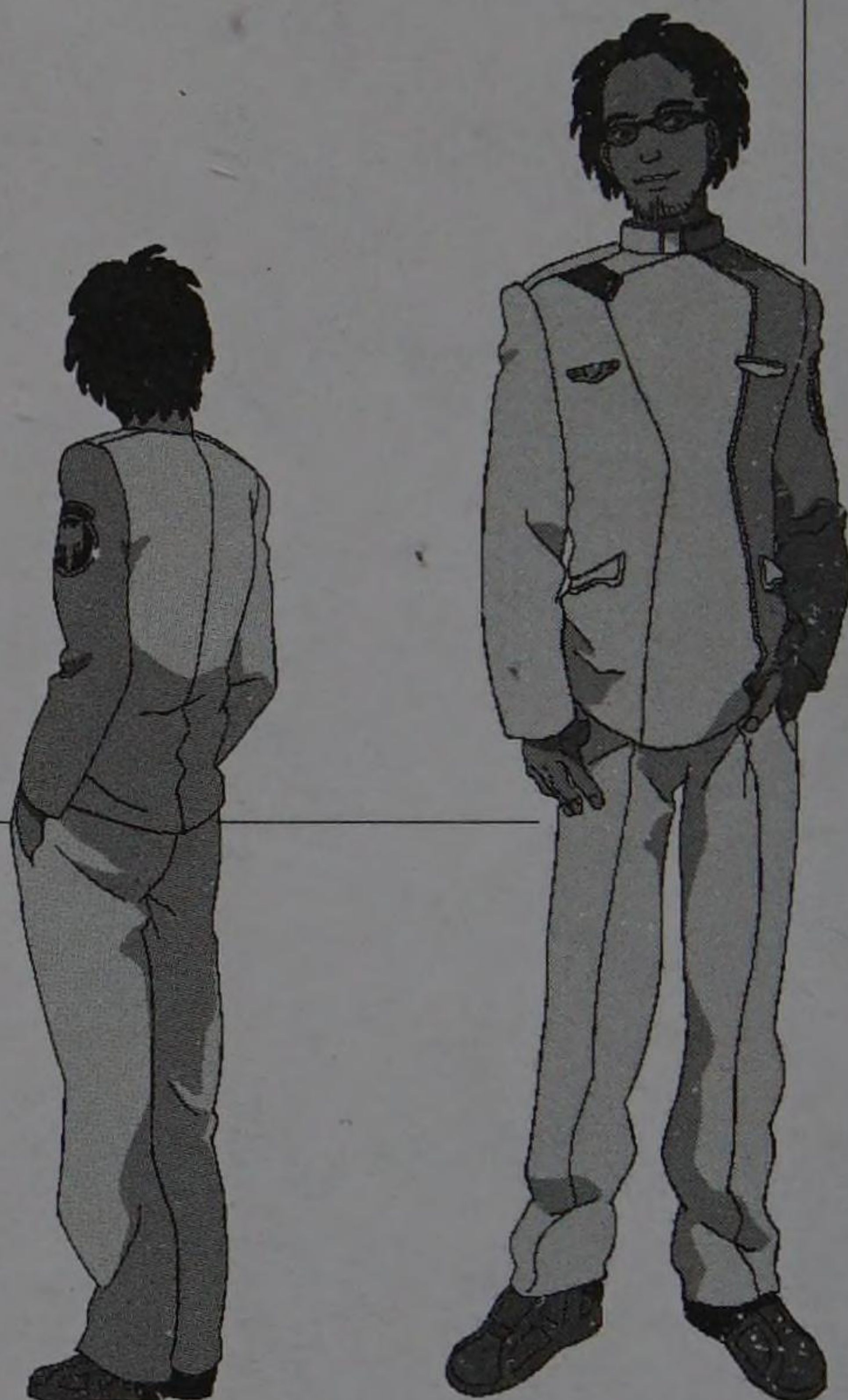
A jack-of-all-trades, Sato has done work as a fine artist, writer, illustrator, book designer, and web designer.





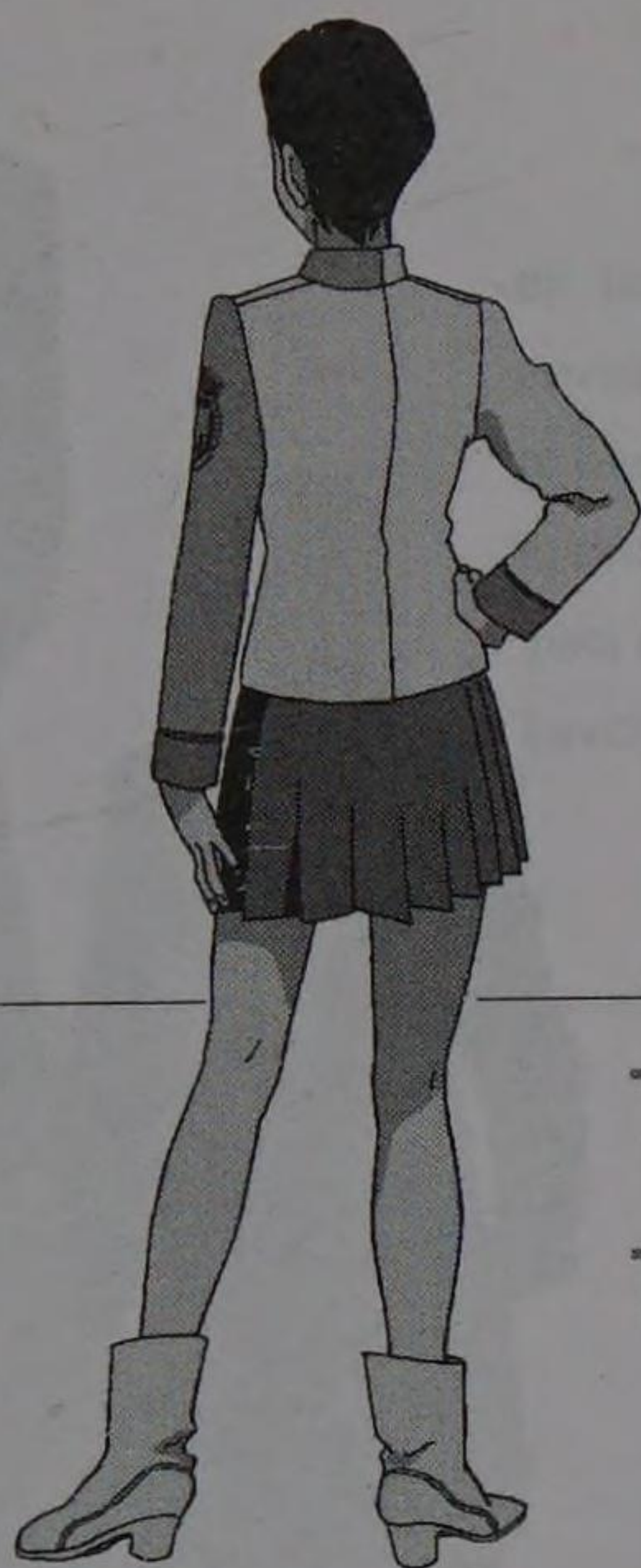
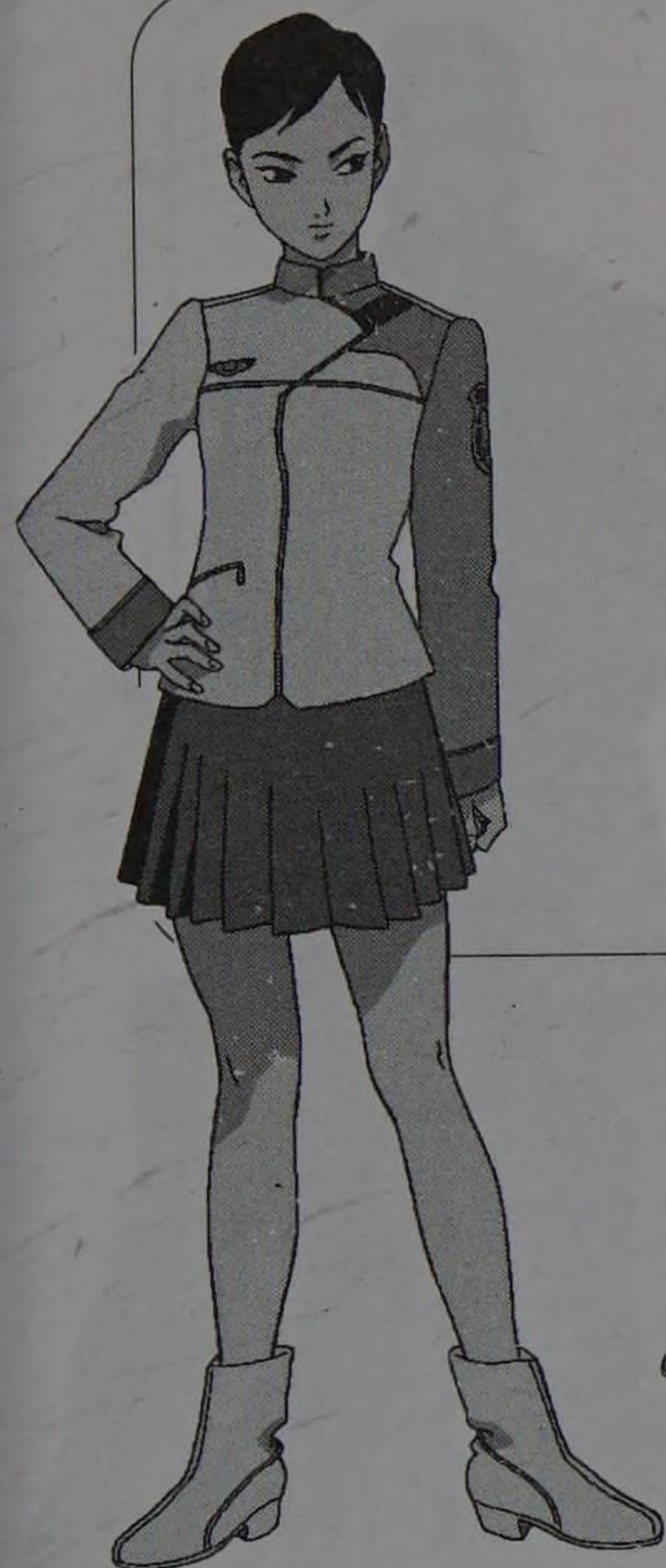
Yomoda Youhei

He is a TERRA operator and handles the information network. A former hacker, he was connected to the Internet from the beginning of the Mu Invasion. His reggae fashion and cheerful behavior are his trademarks. Age: 24



Gomi Masaru

He is another TERRA operator, but this reticent and collected man is a sharp contrast to Yomoda. He was living in Boston during the Mu war, and when the army was defeated, he saw the demise of America firsthand. Age: 25



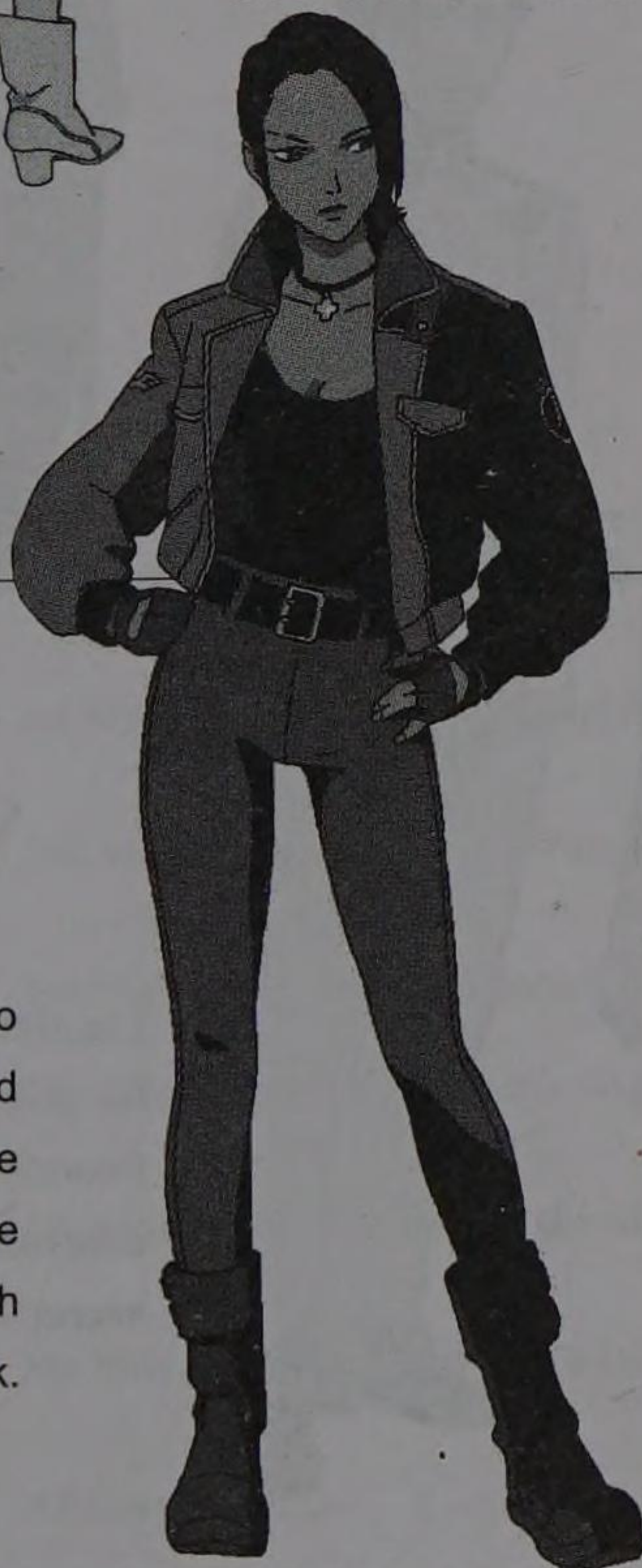
Kim Hotaru

An operator for TERRA. She lost her parents in a Dolem attack when she was very young, and she harbors intense feelings of hatred for Mu. She calls Yagumo Sou when they are alone. Age: 18

RAHXEPHON CHARACTERS PROFILES

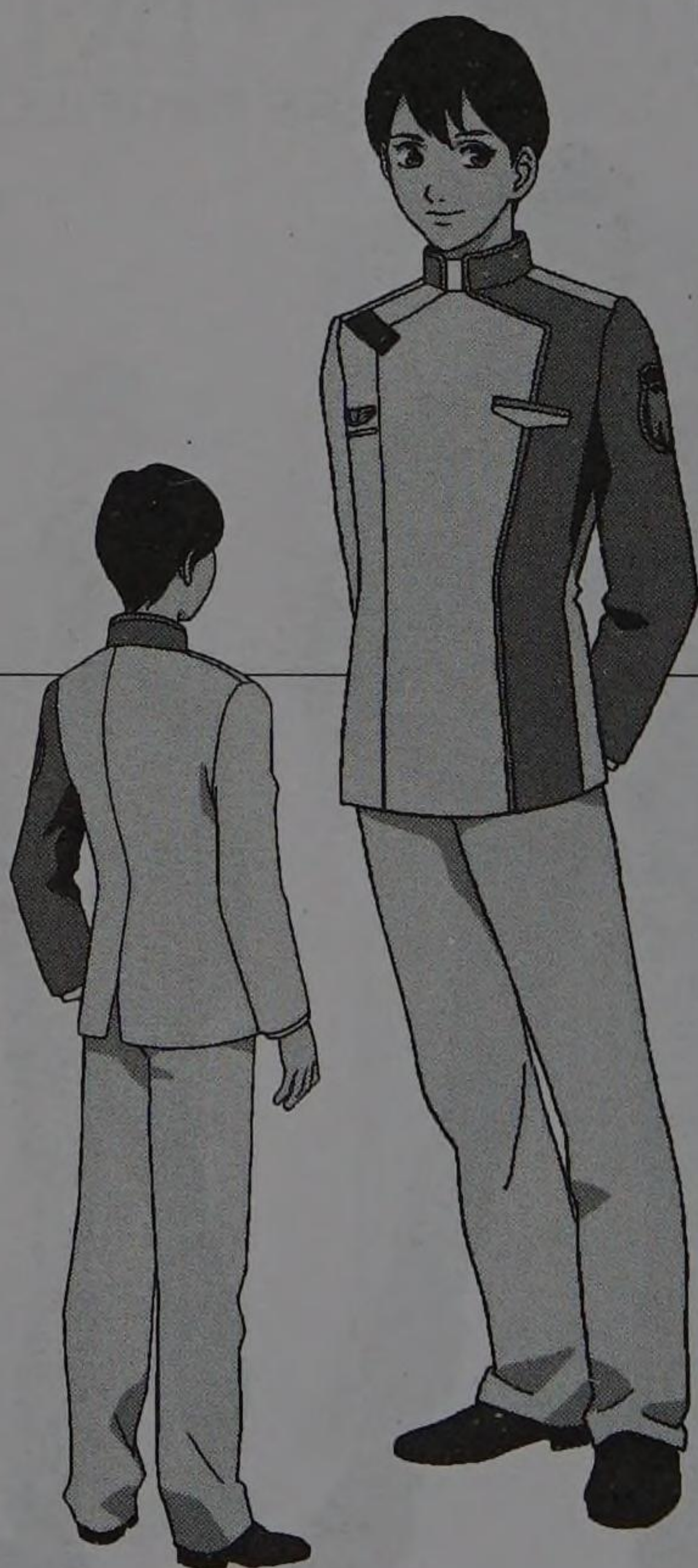
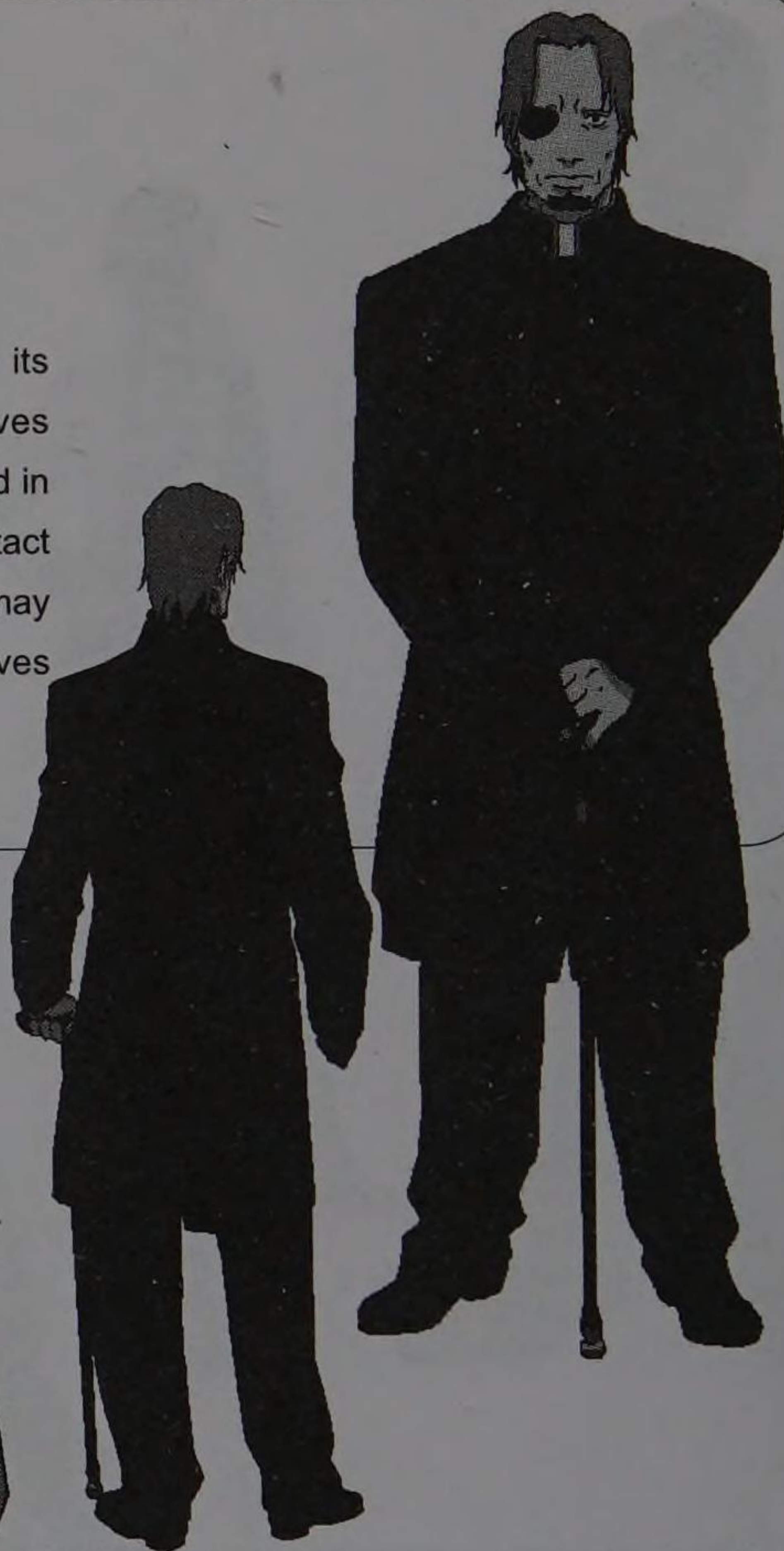
Elvy Hadhiyat

She is the pilot who transferred to TERRA from the Federation and organized Squadron Alpha. At first, she piloted the Shin-Sei, but now pilots the Vermilion. She is good friends with Haruka, but she is a belligerent drunk. Age: 27



Watari Shirow

Shirow is the director of TERRA and its highest authority. He generally leaves command to Kunugi and travels the world in order to do negotiations, and keep contact with each related location. Although he may not look it, he is quite funny, and loves souvenirs. Age: 60



Yagumo Souichi

Lieutenant, TERRA's second-in-command, he gives command while Kunugi is away. Friendly and considerate, he is well-liked by everyone. He is dating Kim, but this is a secret. Age: 22



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RAHXEPHON Volume 3

Hiroshi Ohnogi

Original Story: BONES / Yutaka Izubuchi / RahXephon Project

First Movement: The Dark, Empty Corridor

1

Suddenly, I was in Kichijoji, looking down at the north entrance of Echigoya from above.

Why was I here?

I thought I was in the Rahxephon fighting a Dolem. The last thing I remembered was that it had caught me off guard and wrapped itself around me. I remembered Haruka calling me again and again from the command center. I remembered being in a lot of pain.

And then, I was here.

What had happened to the Rahxephon? And the Dolem? How had they burst through the Absolute Barrier to make it here?

This was Tokyo.

Kichijoji was as crowded as ever. Huge groups of teenagers and various other people were walking around. A bunch of high-school girls bumped into me. Without bothering to apologize, they laughed and disappeared into the throng, leaving only the impression of their white legs under their skirts in my mind. Their laughter echoed through that evening street. Evening ... but it had been night when I fought that Dolem. When had it become evening?

Glancing behind me, I saw my reflection in a building's windows. Even though I was wearing street clothes, the reflection was of me in the FH Suit. Strange....

I heard the clang of metal hitting metal.

The crowd was reflected in the store window. In their midst stood an unusual figure. The person seemed to be a woman, but with something on her head.

The scrape of metal sounded again.

The person turned around. I could not be certain, because her face was almost completely shrouded by a mask, but she seemed to be staring straight at me. Lips, bare underneath the mask, spread into a grin. It was the grin of a predator who had found its prey.

I knew I was in trouble, but I couldn't look away.

The woman stood up. She was naked, and her breasts wobbled slightly. I had to turn around. I had to turn around and see if the woman was really there. I knew this in my mind, but I could not tear my eyes away from the reflection of those red lips.

The clang sounded again and the woman ran toward me.

The smiling lips were closing in on me.

The people in the crowd went by, completely oblivious to her, yet not a single person was blocking the path she was using to run toward me.

The clanging sounds became more intense as the woman closed in on me.

The lips were closing in on me. So much so that I could see their moist sheen.

Throwing my head back, I turned and looked away from the window ... but the woman was not there. There was only the crowd, no different from before.

But I did see lips. Two sets of lips, pressing against the other. A man and a woman, hand in hand. The couple looked over at me.

It was Mamoru and Asahina.

"What've you been up to?" Asahina asked.

"You guys are all right?..."

"What are you talking about? Are you OK?" Asahina lightly knocked on my head. Hers was exactly the reaction you would expect of someone who had run into a classmate at Kichijoji on Sunday.

"What's going on here?"

"Huh? What the hell are you going on about?"

"Come on, let's go do something!"

Mamoru clapped a hand on my shoulder.

"You must have been bored."

Bored? Oh, that's right. What was I doing here?

We went to an arcade. Mamoru was playing a fighting game. The games looked older than the ones on the outside. I grew bored and turned away. I saw the game behind me displaying high scores and the date on its monitor.

7-3-2015

My birthday. That shouldn't be ... but I wasn't sure.

Asahina grabbed onto my arm, saying something about how great Mamoru was. I could feel her breasts through the light fabric of her summer clothes. She wasn't wearing a bra.

In an instant, all the sounds around me vanished.

All I could hear were my own breath and heartbeat. I could see the game screen, but it meant absolutely nothing to me. It was like my whole body had become that arm. One after another, each pore on my arm opened, and it felt like they were groping at Asahina's chest.

What was I thinking?

Fried octopus.

Sunset.

We were sitting on some stairs, eating the octopus together. It felt like we had been at the arcade for a long time, but the sun hadn't gone down yet.

Mamoru was talking to a friend on his mobile phone. That was weird. Mobile phone use was restricted in Tokyo Jupiter, except for army and government personnel. It wasn't something a high-school kid would just carry around....

But I wasn't sure.

The sunset made my eyes sting.

The reception must have been bad because Mamoru moved away. Asahina and I were left alone.

I felt someone grab my hand. It was Asahina. That was not good. If Mamoru spotted us, he'd beat me up. I looked around for him, but he was nowhere in sight.

"Just stay like this."

She squeezed my hand, and when I looked back at her, her face was up close to mine.

"There's some sauce on your mouth," she said casually. "I'll clean it up for you."

Her lips, tinted faintly with lipstick, moved closer. The tip of her tongue brushed over them coquettishly. And then to my lips....

"Ahhh!"

A dark back alley. Between buildings, I could see a thin sliver of the evening sky. It looked ominous somehow.

I kept on running.

Four blocks.

Which way would take me out of here?

Back street, back street, back street.

There was nobody in sight.

Which way would take me out of here?

I ran.

I ran.

My breath came out in ragged huffs.

Narrow strips of the evening sky. Vivid shades of orange ran through it.

Which way would take me out of here?

Back there again.

At the north entrance to Kichijoji.

Miss Haruka was there.

Inside a store playing a languid, broken jazz tune. The setting sun shone through the windows. In front of Miss Haruka was a cocktail called a Daquiri or something. In front of me was a Kilimanjaro coffee.

"Are ... aren't we inside Tokyo Jupiter?"

Miss Haruka did not respond.

"I feel like I'm going nuts. What year is it really?"

Miss Haruka did not respond.

"Is it '29?"

Miss Haruka did not respond.

"Why am I back here?"

"Have a drink."

Those few, short words escaped her lips.

"What?"

"You wanted it, didn't you? That coffee. They make good coffee here."

Oh, that's right. I wanted a coffee, didn't I?

"I thought I was dreaming."

I listened to the languid jazz.

"This is exactly how I remember Tokyo. Asahina and my friends are just like always...."

"Then it isn't a dream."

"But, it's different."

My voice was dry and stuck in my throat. The coffee I drank to moisten it only tasted bitter.

"You should do what you want."

When I looked up at her in surprise, the setting sun had cast a light shadow over her face, and I couldn't read her expression.

"The real world is just what each person carries in his or her heart. There are as many of them as there are people."

No. That's not right.

But I wasn't sure.

"But if you think that what you experience is real, then this is the real world, don't you think?"

The long shadows had travelled down to Miss Haruka's chest.

Had her breasts always been that big?

What was I thinking? My blood began to rush to a certain area.

"Anyway, you are now in what is the real world for you."

"Am I?"

"It's wonderful. You don't have to fight anymore."

I see. I don't have to fight anymore.

"But you are a boy."

"What?"

"You're a man, aren't you?"

The next thing I knew, I was doing something awful. I had pushed Miss Haruka over and was groping her breasts.

They were wonderful, warm mounds in my palms.

Was this what it meant to be a man?

Was this what a man should do?

"I-I'm sorry!"

I panicked and tried to pull my hands away, but Miss Haruka grabbed them and pressed my hands back against her breasts.

"Be a man. It doesn't matter that I have a boyfriend. It doesn't matter that I'm older. Do what you want to do. Do whatever you feel like."

"No!"

No!

No!

"I'm not forcing myself! I'm not holding back! I ... I...."

I couldn't go on after that.

"Liar."

Miss Haruka gazed at me with her expressionless eyes.

"You're just telling yourself that. But everyone knows. No matter how hard you try to hide it, this is what you want. It's all right."

No!

No!

But my body betrayed me. My blood rushed to my groin, so much so that it hurt.

"Come on. Don't be afraid."

No! I mustn't do this! No!

But my fingers moved against my will.

"That's how people get hurt."

Before I knew it, I was on my back, being held to the ground by Miss Haruka.

Her chest was right above me.

"When they're acting on their desires, people don't mind hurting others."

"No...," I said in a raspy voice.

Miss Haruka caught my hand and played with my fingers.

"Can your fingers perform yet?"

I strained to break free, but Miss Haruka wouldn't allow it, and pressed my fingers hard against her breast.

Through the fabric I felt her nipple getting slightly harder.

"Can your fingers tune yet?"

From her breasts to her stomach, and farther down ... down....

"No!"

This wasn't Miss Haruka. This was not how I imagined her. This was very wrong!

No!

No!

No!

But I wasn't sure.

The next thing I knew, I was back at the north entrance of Kichijoji. The setting sun was shining.

I had to get home.

The bus was shaking. I gazed intently at my hand, at the hand that had grasped Miss Haruka's breast. Just thinking about how it felt made my groin tighten. That I would get excited remembering that made me the worst person in the world. The worst. The worst.

The W-O-R-S-T.

Before I knew it, the bus had stopped in front of Shakujii park.

I got off the bus. The scenery was the same as always, and the street was unchanged.

And there was my home.

The home where I had been raised since birth. Where I had lived until my 17th birthday.

My key ... come to think of it, what had I done with my house key? I had left Tokyo, changed clothes at Miura beach, and then.... Was that where I had lost them? I couldn't remember.

While I was standing in front of the door, sort of spacing out, the door opened.

It was my mother.

My blue-blooded mother.

"Oh, welcome home."



"Thanks."

It had been a long time since we had last gathered around the dinner table. How many years had it been? Mom was always busy with work. Hamburg steaks was one of her specialties, wasn't it? It had been so long that I had to think about the answer.

"That's unusual."

"What is?"

"That you actually made dinner."

Mom forced a smile. She must have thought I was being sarcastic because she never came home early.

"Hurry up and eat it without complaining."

"I don't even want to think about complaining."

I didn't want to think at all. That this might be a dream. That my mother's blood was blue. That I had been living outside Tokyo Jupiter. About the people at TERRA. About Mr. Rikudoh. About Megumi. Or about Miss Haruka....

"I haven't made it for a while, so it might be a bit off. Is the flavor too strong?"

I shook my head. It wasn't strong. It wasn't anything. This tasted like cardboard.

We used our chopsticks in silence.

The television had been left on, and the newscaster was talking calmly about accidents and incidents.

It was just like any other dinner.

But something was different.

"Mom."

I looked up at her, but the words I tried to speak got caught in my throat. She turned to me and spoke through lips moistened with the grease from the Hamburg steak.

"What?"

I couldn't speak.

I could only drop my head.

Suddenly, I felt like someone had called my name.

"Ayato."

I looked around, but no one was there. Only the newscaster on the TV was talking.

"Ayato Kamina. Can you hear me? Ayato Kamina, if you can hear this, please respond."

That's strange. What kind of prompters was this newscaster reading?

"Say something."

I looked at my mother, but she hadn't noticed anything and kept eating in silence.

"We cannot grasp what your current situation is. Switch your FH Suit to Mode C and let us know you're alive."

Weird. Who was this, and why were they calling me?

"At this rate, you won't be able to come back here, Ayato Kamina. You are ... a ... du...."

My mother had turned it off.

"The signal's bad these days."

That's all she said before going back to her dinner.

I must have imagined that. That's right.

But I wasn't sure.

I went back to my own room for the first time in ages. It was just the same as I had left it that day. It was as if time had stopped. And today was July third. My birthday....

The cordless phone in my room rang. It was from Mamoru.

"What happened to you?"

"Huh?"

"Going home without telling us! Hiroko was worried about you."

"Oh. Sorry...."

I apologized without thinking about it. Why had I apologized? Why? Why?

"Well, see you at school tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

He hung up.

The dial tone played over and over again in my ear.

Tomorrow.... School.... I thought the day after my birthday was a Saturday.

But I wasn't sure.

I fell onto my bed. All at once that soft feeling came to life in my hands. It was the feeling of Miss Haruka's breasts. I was horrible.

I got excited just remembering it. I rubbed my hands several times on the sheets, trying to wipe off the feeling. The scraping sound it produced cut through the silence.

A cool peace was creeping up behind me.

"That's enough. Enough. It's nice here."

The cool peace whispered to itself.

"This is my world. This is where I should be. I won't get scared.
I won't get hurt. I don't have to fight. It's nice here."

In the midst of that cool peace, someone was laughing quietly.
Someone with red lips.

The laughter was abrasive to my ears.

"So, that's it!"

I jumped up and glared at the laughing person.

"That's what you want me to think!"

But there was no one there.

I was really mad.

"Don't fuck with me! Don't you *fucking* fuck with me!"

I moved along my bookshelf, throwing the books to the floor.
With every book I threw, I repeated "Don't fuck with me!" like a mantra.
Nothing happened. There were books all over the floor. But they weren't
books. They were filled with nothing but blank pages. What the hell?
What was going on?

And then, letters began to appear.

A ya toaya toA YA TO

My name appeared, broken up, then disappeared again.

Aya TO a YAtO a ya

to

a

ya

toayatoa, yatoyatoya

to

to

to

to

to tori.

riyan,

torapariyan

sneak out of...

What?

What the hell?

Who was that?

"Who are you?!"

In response, I was hugged from behind. Turning around, I saw my mother's laughing red lips. She was wearing lipstick.

"Mother."

Her breasts were pressed up against my back more firmly than they needed to be.

"You're going to listen to your mother, aren't you?"

It was a cold voice that raised goosebumps on my skin.

"You are the Xephon's rightful instrumentalist."

In the waning light of the setting sun that streamed in through the windows, a smaller version of myself appeared without warning. My mother, as she used to be, appeared, too. Together, we were making blocks or something. That was intellectual training of some sort, and you thread green and red and yellow-colored spheres and cubes and cylinders on a string.

"A performer's true worth is realized only as long as he follows the score faithfully."

I threaded the string. gnirts eht dedaerht I.

"You're not ready for improvisation, you know that. You can't even tune the Xephon properly yet."

Green and red and yellow and red and green and yellow and green and yellow and red.

"But it's not beyond you. You were just confused...."

My younger self was concentrating with all his might on threading the spheres and cubes onto the string. I didn't know it was intellectual training. I was just doing what my mother told me. I had been playing into my mother's hand.

"As long as you're here, you won't need to be afraid. You won't need to be hurt. You won't need to fight. In this world, nothing will ruffle you, and you can lead a normal life; a life as the Xephon's performer."

I hadn't known it was intellectual training. I had just done as I was told by my mother.

I was to become an instrumentalist.

"You're here with me. Isn't that nice?"

I felt violated by a sickening feeling, like someone had stuck their tongue into my skull. Reflexively, I kicked them away.

Kicked who?

My mother.

My own mother.

Just like an ugly beast. Just like a despicable being.

My mother lay curled up on the floor and did not move.

"Uhh...."

She groaned intermittently and gazed at me with pained eyes.

"Is that a nice thing to do to your own mother?"

That's right! That's not something I should do. Don't show off just because you're right! You always do that! You're always right! It's always my fault!

"Why? I gave you everything you wanted, didn't I? I always thought only of you...."

"Liar!"

I was shouting.

"You *did* do something for me. No matter what I did, you never opposed. But you never really got mad at me. You never really hugged me!"

You just had me playing in the palm of your hand. All you did was let me do what I wanted.

"I'm your...."

My mother reached a hand out to me, shaking. She was reaching out to grab me.

Run!

I turned my back on her and ran out.

"Why?! Why won't you listen to me?! You're my son!"

Words were flung at my back like curses.

Shut up!

Shut up!

Shut up!

I ran.

I ran out into the evening streets.

As I ran, I remembered something.

Those yellow, round teaching aids. I remembered why I was

putting them on a string. That day, I had been trying to make a necklace for my mother.

I kept running, trying to shake off all my thoughts.

I ran.

The next thing I knew, I was in Shakujii park. The evening sun carved orange waves on the water's surface. A girl was standing with her back to the water.

It was Reika.

"I thought I'd find you...."

If this world was made for me, I knew you would have to be in it somewhere.

"We finally meet."

I felt about to cry with relief.

"I ... I want to go home. Back to the real world."

"The real world? The real world is just something each person carries in his or her heart."

Don't say the same kinds of things that that Miss Haruka said!

"I don't care if it's real! It doesn't have to be real! It's awful here. It isn't real. I feel like something's clinging to me, like everything is happening on the other side of a thick membrane. It's making me angry. This may be the world I wished for, but I hate this world! I'm not here! I don't feel like I'm alive. I ... I...."

I just wanted to take the only sure thing in this world and hold it in my hands!

"Be quiet."

Reika lightly pressed her fingertip to my lips. It felt cold from

the evening air.

"In the real world, there may be truths that you will not want to see. If you don't mind that, if you're ready to accept that...."

I am. I am!

She nodded in response to the words I could not utter, and then slid her fingers down my throat.

I coughed. Something black was being pulled out of me. It hurt. It was the first time I'd felt pain since entering this world. I couldn't breathe.

It was pulled out, and I kept coughing, my body contorting in pain.

A black shadow fell over me while I was crying, feeling like I was about to vomit.

When I looked up, I saw the Rahxephon's instrumentalist seat sticking out of Sanpoji pond.

It was the Rahxephon.

I was happy. I was in pain, but I was happy.

I looked back, but Reika was no longer there. There was only the wind blowing past.

2

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the Rahxephon's pilot seat. I was surrounded by the honeycomb structure of screens around me. In them I saw the projected image of the Dolem that was hugging the Rahxephon.

That's when I realized what had been missing from that world.

Smells.

There were smells here. The faint scent of the mist rising off the surface of the water. The water's surface wavered. I hit the Dolem with the force of all of my anger at having been manipulated.

Fragment 1: Shinobu Miwa

There was no death scream, only an expression of agony as the Mulian vanished from the Performer's Stage.

At the same time, Ms. Maya leaned back and fell out of her chair, wearing the Mask of Malhakana.

"Are you all right, Ms. Maya?"

Commander Kuki rushed to her side. Ms. Maya rose to her feet, brushing his hand away.

"There is no need for you to worry about me."

"But...."

Ms. Maya's eyes turned cold again and she glared at the commander, but I did not miss the glittering droplet in the corner of her eyes. Ms. Maya was crying? It couldn't be.

What could Ms. Maya have seen while wearing the Mask of Malhakana, when she went to meet master Ayato in the dream that Vivace had spun for her.

No, I must not imagine such things. One must not rise above one's station.

Having defeated the Dolem, I returned to Neriya Shrine. As I was climbing out of the Rahxephon, I noticed Miss Haruka was in the Advanced Research room.

"Ayato."

Miss Haruka ran up to me and caught me in a big hug.

"I was worried about you! Three hours! We couldn't contact you for three whole hours. We couldn't even confirm the Rahxephon was still whole."

I could smell Miss Haruka's perfume. I could feel the stiff fabric of her TERRA uniform. I could feel her warmth. Yes, this was real. This was the real thing.

I was back.

Just then, I remembered what I had done in that other world. What I had done to Miss Haruka.

Flustered, I leapt away from Miss Haruka.

For a second, a hurt expression flashed across her face.

No, it's not like that. But I couldn't make the words come out.

As I tried to get the words out, her hurt expression was replaced by the stern expression of a soldier.

"Good work. Please write a report later."

That's all she said before she turned her back to me.

Seeing that hurt ... a lot.

No, I wasn't rejecting you, I was just denying my own guilt.

But the words would not come out.

Second Movement: Black Egg, Parasite Egg, Tuning Egg**Quon Kusaragi 1**

A distant place, a distant voice. Where am I? I hear my brother's voice. I hear it, but I cannot understand. No, I cannot understand. The researchers check their various monitors and carefully observe the changes in my body. There are more people in this room than usual. Even so, does no one notice the swarming multitude of people? Those wriggling about my feet? Those clinging to my shoulders? What are they? Are they my dream? Or are they merely the consciousnesses of Mulians trying to tune in to this world, having altered the receptors in their sensory areas? It does not matter which. My heart already cried itself hoarse. No, no, that is not correct. Please look closely at each of their shining white bellies, and at the hands of salvation within that light. Yes, yes, I see it. His figure within the light. He will destroy the darkness and, bringing with him my flesh, ascend the steps to awakening, awash in the light of anguish. In that light, a sapphire blue darkness shall spread, and in that darkness, the black womb of hell shall rise. That is not the womb of a woman with child, that is all-encompassing darkness. Darkness. Pain....

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for

myself.

"Why not give her a kiss? She might wake up if you do. How about it, prince?"

That voice belonged to Sayoko Nanamori. The voice of the one who avoids me. Without knowing why, I know why. It is the voice of a woman trying to force her body between me and my brother.

"I just...."

Ollin. The one called Ayato Kamina. I'm just ... what? I just came because I was worried about Quon? I just came because I want to embrace Quon? I just want Quon. Quon. Is there a bug in the control line? That is not concurrent with my body, with my will. That is not concurrent with my flesh, with my heart. Although my brain synapses are active, they are too faint to have a numeric value. This is the condition known as sleep, but it is not R.E.M. sleep. That is, sleep without Rapid Eye Movement. As I cannot move a single eye, what shall I spin on my fingers?

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

The stench of mud. The stench of the gutter. The stench of poison. The stench of living things. Those reactivate my spirit. My slippery,

sliding consciousness flows back. My joy widens with each fold, the mucous membrane increases its tenacity. Slimy, slippery, slippy, slithery, slimery, slicky. The expressions you can make using "sli" and the sensation that sound carries. Those who fear death ceremoniously offer up their pleasure to a blazing life. Linear thinking set free. Bring in non-linear thinking. The child who is born, begun in a conjugal bed, is the leech, Hiruko. She was placed in a boat of rushes and carried away downstream. Hiruko is a heathen. One who could not even become so much as a heathen. For she is the first result of genetic manipulation. We may indulge in the joys of immorality as much as we like. They may indulge as much as they like, those who are not of my blood.

Fragment 1: Sayoko Nanamori

Hmm, and that's supposed to be good?

After several agonizing minutes, Isshiki let out a long sigh, like he was just coming to, and pulled away from me.

And, with a look on his face like he was above it all, he watched Quon on the other side of the glass.

Why are men always so short when they've done the deed? I like to bask in the afterglow, maybe whisper sweet nothings, but men are always preoccupied. There is that they are digital and controlling the world. Women are analog to the core. My heart was still in agony.

No matter where they are, men want to control women according to their desires. Women control men, while being controlled by them. Otherwise, who would choose to do the deed in a monitor room? While we were doing it, they kept quietly displaying data on the comatose Quon.

"I wonder why Sleeping Beauty is still sleeping. When did she eat the witch's poisoned apple?"

Does that make me the witch? If I could make poisoned apples, I'd have fed them to people a long time ago. To you, first of all.

"Earlier, a Dolem used a psycho-wave attack on Ayato. It's a backlash from that."

"Really?"

Isshiki nodded curtly. Just how much did he know? I just told him that Ayato and Quon influenced each other through the Rahxephon and he wasn't surprised in the least. When that fact was first observed, Doctor Itsuki wasn't surprised, either. *What more do they know that I don't?*

I put on my lipstick using the glass as a mirror. Beyond the reflection of my red lips, I could see Quon sleeping. It looked like she was smiling slightly. It was as if she were sneering at us.

"Hey, do you think she saw us before?"

"Doesn't matter. But about the important issue...."

"And what about you?"

He had promised. For the safety of the custody of Doctor Itsuki, for confirmation of my position, and custody of Quon....

He gave me a cold look.

"I am an honest man."

An honest man? It's proof of a dishonest man if you have to say those words. Well, no matter. I knew we were both just using each other.

I went out into the hallway right after Isshiki. I didn't want to be in a room filled with the smell of that man.

That was a mistake.

When I stepped into the hallway, Haruka was there. Jeez, why'd she have to be there of all places, and at a time like this? Oh, she'd brought flowers to come see Quon. How very kind.

I hadn't thought anyone would come at this time of night--if I had, I wouldn't have done it--I wouldn't have been fixing my hair, completely off-guard, coming out right after a man. Only an idiot or a saint wouldn't imagine what had happened after seeing that.

Well, I would just have to take a defiant attitude about it.

"Hey, do you have a spare set of stockings on you?"

I didn't care if Haruka misunderstood me. I just couldn't have anyone tell Itsuki.

"How long have you been?..."

Hey, now! Shouldn't you show some friendly concern first?

"I don't think I have to tell you."

"Have to? But we're...."

"Even best friends have some things they'd rather others keep their noses out of. Right?"

You have some, too. I know. If I hinted in this direction just enough, she would keep her mouth shut. Women know how frightening another woman's vengeance can be.

I smiled widely and turned to walk away.

"That's true.... You're right."

I heard Haruka speaking behind me. A complete success. I know because I borrowed your words for it.

Just then, I felt something warm running down my leg. I really would need a spare set of stockings.

Fragment 2: Helena Bähbem

A cold room. No matter how hot this island gets, this room is always cold. It's as frozen as its owner's heart.

"Come in, Helena."

It was a kind voice, but inside the room lay like a snake in hiding and the curved tips of those venomous fangs shot out at my heart.

"Changes are occurring in the emotional state of Quon Kisaragi while she is being looked after at Niraikanai. She may be close to awakening."

"All who sleep awaken eventually, Helena."

"I've dispatched the physiological research team."

Lord Bähbem made an almost-imperceptible movement. That act was ... just like he was about to pat a girl's head. As soon as I thought that, I could see the figure of a young girl at his side, reading a picture book.

Who was that?

"Good girl, Helena."

It was a kind voice that bubbled up from the depths of my memory. Hearing that voice, my heart fluttered. I felt like I could do anything, no matter how awful.

Quon Kisaragi 2

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

The image of other people's bodies colored by the joy of the immoral reinforced my own self-image. I was able to regain my once-destroyed physical image. The images piled one on the other and composed my body. Just as snow falls on the world at large, so dreams fall in my heart. The vague boundary between myself and others is made clear as it towers. When the jungle beast was named lion, it stopped being a fearsome creature. In the same way, knowledge of people brings change. When you name something, it gives it substance. Once you have its name, you can control it. Let us name some things. We will give them beautiful, adorable names. A rod-like organ, covered in skin, having many joints, with a skeletal construction. Let us call this a finger. An organ that can always catch something in reflected light, but cannot watch that thing forever. Let us call this an eye. This is hair. This, a chest. This, a womb. These are finger nails. These are ears. These are lips. These are thighs. These are.... Names can be further segmented forever. And you are a part of those names. Man is part of a segment. Ah, so that was the power to distinguish oneself from others? Having recovered my body, I noticed the restraints attached to me. Why? So I would not hurt myself while in a coma? Because I would hurt myself while I was unable to distinguish myself. There were the restraints, and also metal shards connected all over my body. They measured the electrode changes in order to compare them to my changes. No, those are a distinct segment. If you lose a seg-

ment, the boundary between self and other becomes vague, and the meaning of the restraints and monitors becomes ill-formed. Along with their meaning, their forms become fuzzy. See, I broke out.

Fragment 3: Itsuki Kisaragi

Why was the physiological research team from the Foundation there now, of all times, to carry out more research on Quon?

The timing was bad. Since Ayato's arrival, Quon had been experiencing an influence that was not mild. Even this coma was because parts of her shared a synchronization of the spirit with Ayato, and she had experienced the backlash of the Dolem's psychological attack on him. It might have been symptomatic that she was in the period before her awakening. If she had awakened while the research team was collecting data....

But Quon had disappeared from the ICU. Just as we were starting to relax, we were hit by a tempest of worry.

"Nanamori, what happened to Quon?"

"I don't believe it! She was sleeping just a moment ago!"

"She walked out without putting on her life module. Make arrangements and look for her. Hurry!"

Things were bad. If Quon went out without her life module, it could turn into a disaster.

Quon Kisaragi 3

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

Because I had taken off my life module, my consciousness expanded. I see. That had been to seal up my consciousness and also to protect it. It was a container for my soul. As proof of this, my body was dispersed endlessly, and, drawn by various souls, it diffused.

"Oww, that must be the liver and leek I ate yesterday." "Huh? I left it here? I'm such a spazz." "Do you hate me?" "Shut up, bitch." "Why did she have to die?"

The flow of consciousnesses. I am jostled by their rapid current, pushed this way and that.

"Tweet-tweet, Michiru, should we crumble a bit of bread for you?"

But none ever matched this flow. Hopes. Dreams. Egos set free. I feel as if something like this happened before, but I forgot all about that time and it feels like something awful happened that time, but I can't remember anymore. Isolation. Severance. Bad memories, quiet loneliness.

"But that time was totally different! 'Cuz, y'see, I knew who I was. Growth? I told you, I'm all right."

A heart in the stream-of-consciousnesses, it was a heart, a consciousness to which I grew accustomed. What is that?

Youhei Yomoda: "Huh? Quon, dear, what are you doing here?"

Masaru Gomi: "You shouldn't be calling her 'dear'." "It's fine.

Come to think of it, they said they were looking for you. Are you all right?"

The desires hidden behind their words.

"Can I hold you?"

Words they fling about to test them, their thoughts are rigid. I see. It seems they only see me as they imagine me. There is no parallel in the discrepancy between their imagined me and the real me. Ah ha ha ha. How funny. The one with the brush erases the other's memories, and I am carried away again on the stream-of-consciousnesses.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

"Nirai Island was a Christian island. See, when the prohibition of religion was revoked during the Meiji Revolution, rumors were flying. What is this? Deus was so great the islanders wept tears of joy. But the gods of the Meiji became even crueler and more vindictive. This was the 'Fifth Crumbling of Negoro' they claimed, and they say it got brutal. What is this? You've seen Rahxephon, the Goddess of Mercy? She was, in the beginning, the Blessed Virgin Mary. Some of us, we light a candle for her every month, in return for her protection and blessing. There was a doorway. Rocks have been piled up inside it, and they say the Holy Virgin is enshrined there. It was the government men who didn't find it. You think

it's older than that, you say? You might be right. I don't know. They say it was here on this island since before the 'holy and perfect' mother and child arrived. You should know about divine returns. That's from making a promise with the Blessed Mary. And about being spirited back? Yes, they call it that, too. For some reason, it seems the gods spirit them off. They say two young children suddenly appeared one day, out of nowhere, at the Rahxephon shrine. I heard it from my grandma Masa, who saw it herself. Two young doctors went to check the shrine to study something or other, and that's when they appeared, I'm told. I didn't see it, so I don't know. That's just what everyone around here says. One was crying and one was asleep. The one went on crying, and the other whistled in her sleep. She called for her mother, and asked for her father, and kept on whistling in her sleep. Whistling, whistling, for several months. The dreams tied to the sleeping girl's fingertips could have been sounds or could have been worlds. What is this? From the deep, dark pool of memory, ancient times are awakening your body."

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

Kim: "Hey, Sou. Why don't we tell everyone about us?"

Yagumo: "Come on, we've talked about it lots of times before, and each time we decide we missed the opportunity to tell people about

it."

Kim: "But it keeps getting harder and harder to keep it secret."

Yagumo: "Then, why don't *you* tell? I'm not against it. I'd just be too embarrassed to announce to everyone that we're dating this far in. I'm sure everyone's already noticed."

Kim: "Do you think so?"

Yagumo: "I do."

Me: "Yeah, right."

Yagumu, Kim: "Eh?!"

Me: "Souichi, you are a coward. To you, your current, undefined relationship is the perfect relationship. If it became clear, and a crack formed in your relationship, it would be Kim's fault."

Yagumo: "What are you saying, Quon?"

Kim: "Sou ... is that true?"

Me: "Hotal, you are a coward, too. You're just trying to go along with what he's decided, even though you haven't made your own decision. Even though you know that it is hurting Megumi."

Kim: "That's not true!"

Me: "It *is* true. The two of you are perfectly suited for each other. Souichi, even though you can think strategically, you are unfamiliar with the finer points of romantic interactions, but Hotal, on the other hand, is practical about that sort of thing, though she can't decide anything for herself. You're perfectly suited to each other. You're fooling each other. Narcissism. Eroticism. Hostility."

Yagumo: "Quon, that's a bit ruthless, honey."

Me: "Ruthless? Pitiless, merciless, fearless. Matchless, dauntless, poodles. The words make a chain and are unclassifiable. You cannot

break off the flow of the subconscious."

Kim: "I'm not that cruel. You're mistaken."

Even though you say that in the depths of your consciousness, know that you are not the woman you think you are. I mustn't. I must leave, before this turns into another disaster, it seems like this happened before, too, the one with the brush should erase the memories.

And again, I float on the stream of consciousnesses.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

Mine, that alone, when it is about to lurk in transparency, if it is drained off into my residence, there is the chance for much to be held within. Rahxephon rejoices at knowing, Xephon dies learning how, Rah dies rejoicing.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

"The shrine of Rahxephon, Goddess of Mercy, sure looks a lot like the turtle-shaped Kikkou graves you find in Okinawa."

"You don't think they look more like the burial mounds on Kyushu?"

"The burial mounds, huh? It certainly does share the egg-shape."

"Did you know, Shogo, that in Korean, the world for sky is 'hanurl,' and that it was derived from 'han arl,' a word meaning giant egg. Maybe the reason the burial mounds are egg-shaped is because they viewed the heavens as being egg-shaped, too."

"Kenichi Tanikawa, isn't it?"

"Then, although the records are incomplete, in the accounts of the missionaries who came to Japan, there are records that say heaven and earth were created when a bull destroyed an egg with his horns."

"Eggs, heaven and graves, huh? You've got your three points, but where's the proverb?"

"Hold on. Did you hear something?"

"Yeah, it sounds like a kid crying."

"It's coming from over there. Let's check it out."

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

"Oh! Quon...."

It called me Quon. Who am I?

"What are you here for? Do you like zunda-mochi?"

I feel as if I've heard that voice before. As if I've seen that person before. When was that? Was it long ago?

"Are you all right?"

"Even Quon knows."

The one who asked if I was all right was a young man. Who was this man? That, I did not know.

The one who said, "Even Quon knows," was that woman. Who was that woman? That, I did not know.

"What is all right? What do even I know?"

The man's expression, which was lacking in symmetry, hardened.

"What are you saying?"

"I am an egg. My egg. You took my egg."

"Lord Bähbem took your egg."

The name Bähbem poured into the stream of my consciousness.

"Good morning. I see you're awake, Quon."

Kind words, a kind voice, a kind face. He was deceitful. A living Methuselah. Que sera, sera. I can't, I can't, it is not the stream of memory, I must bring my consciousness back to the present. I gaze at the man who is also called Shirow.

"Not the egg in Neriya Shrine. My little egg."

The egg in Neriya Shrine? I don't understand. I don't understand, but the words flow out. And once words have flowed out, I cannot retrieve them.

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't play dumb. You *know*. What you made from my tiny egg. One of two. Two of one."

An expression of distress spread across the man's face.

"I had no choice."

"There is nothing in this world about which we have no choice."

"Don't blame me. That was when I still had ambitions, which I embraced without knowing they would burn me through."

Ambitions. Ambition. Perdition, infection, hallucination, condition, specialization, extortion. Apparition, perplexion, exclusion. As the list goes on, the words distort, the consciousness is cut up. No good no good no good. My consciousness is flowing away again.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for happiness.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for tears.

I venture deep into the forest of inescapable death, looking for myself.

1

I got a call out of nowhere from the reporter called Futagami. We ended up talking on a stroll and I walked alongside him. I never knew there were places on the island that looked like this. I don't go out on walks often, so I don't know the area at all. Mr. Futagami walked on in silence. Where was he headed?

"I was told not to say much to outsiders."

"That's cold. You were quick to say you'd do an interview, too. That joke was pretty funny."

Crap. Things might get ugly if he keeps poking his nose in like that.

"Would ya help a guy out with his work some?"

"But ... I don't know very much about this island."

"Even so, there must be some things you know about."

What was that supposed to mean?

"Did you know the leader of the MU Tokyo Government General is a woman?"

I nearly replied without thinking. It was officially a secret to everyone outside TERRA that I was even from Tokyo.

"The group who betrayed the rest of the world is still in Tokyo. They say they're swaggering about Tokyo Government General like they own the place."

"What do you mean, 'everyone who betrayed the rest of the world?'"

"It's not really public knowledge, but they say that right after MU appeared, the American army started using nuclear devices in Japan. But that's incorrect. The first ones to use them were the National Defense Force. Because of that, the American military stationed in Japan got involved because they seemed to be part of it ... and then the Dolem scourge started. According to my sources, the division of the National Defense Force that first used nuclear devices stayed in Tokyo, and became what is now called the Tokyo Government Central. It may be pretty straightforward that they used nuclear devices. To make Tokyo Jupiter, that is."

"I didn't know that."

"Of course you didn't. Silence was strictly enforced. I'd guess only people in Tokyo know."

I hadn't known even when I was in Tokyo. To a high schooler, the world of politics seemed nearly as distant as the Navajo tribe's ceremonies. Even so, no one ever said the group that betrayed the world was in the Tokyo Government Central.

"Take a look at this."

Mr. Futagami held out a photo. It depicted a group of soldiers lined up.

"That's a commemorative photo of the group that betrayed the world. Very conceited of them to take a photo commemorating their betrayal.... The one in glasses was first lieutenant of the National Defense Force at the time, Masayoshi Kuki. And the one next to him is...."

Mr. Futagami kept talking, but I didn't hear a word of it. My hands began to shake uncontrollably. Standing right in the middle of the commemorative photo was my mother, Maya Kamina.

Does that mean my mother betrayed the world?

Fragment 4: Johji Futagami

That was low. Using Maya Kamina on him like that--just nailing Ayato Kamina with the information. What was Isshiki thinking? But doing stuff like that to see what the reaction will be has always been my style....

There hadn't been much of a reaction when I'd brought up Tokyo as a topic, but that photo really worked. The hand with which he held the picture trembled. I wondered what effect showing him old pictures of his

mother would have on him now.

Ah, no, I shouldn't think about it. It's not something I try to analyze. I should just think about conducting myself well with Isshiki and the higher-ups.

Quon Kisaragi 4

What is this?

In the midst of a strong visual image, I see the faces of several people. The two-dimensional information Ollin was looking at in a T1 field was analyzed and then displayed as an image. His face.... The profile that barely remains in my memories of my youth carries my consciousness to the distant horizons of memory. A wailing voice, a sleeping consciousness whistling. Faintly, it climbs the space between dream and reality. A vague memory. A young child stood at the side of my prone body. Cries. Cries. Why would a young child cry? For whose sake? For whom did it call? Had you already become aware of your fate then? Did you cry because, at the end of this world you let slip by, you wish for the unchanging world into which you were born? Did it hurt? Or it it because you wanted to awaken with me? No, no, that is not it. That is forbidden to you. Isn't it, Maya?

Deep in the forest of inescapable death, I found myself.

I found my grave.

Where am I? A place I do not know. The underworld. A place without distance or time or meaning. A maiden draped in yellow clothes,

standing stiffly formal in reverence. Her eyes were intense. Her smile glowed white.

"Ixtli?"

Reika Mishima turned back to face me. Even though she had just been smiling at me, she turned back.

"This is a place where time and space have no meaning. Sometimes cause and effect reverse."

My mark grew warm, as if it had been heated, as if it held cold hatred.

"You're Ixtli, aren't you?"

"I am Ixtli. This is a false face. It is the mask Ayato Kamina desired. You shall find your own truth."

Neriya Shrine expanded in the image, and I saw the form of Zephon, hidden within. Zephon's eyes were on me, and I looked deeper within. Deeper and deeper within, I gazed upon the homeland of my soul, in the distant reaches of time. What was that?

A cold body embraced mine. Ixtli embraced me.

--You have a voice

--What?

--Call forth your own sound. Call forth your own truth.

--A sound within me? An instrument within me?

A string vibrated. A bow sang.

Matter became minute and turned into particles, then split into quarks, and finally into superstrings. The vibration of the strings created matter, the sound of the strings made the world.

That was music. The symphony we call the world.

A black shadow hung over the symphony.

A black egg.

Is that my egg?

My instrument?

Fragment 5: Souichi Yagumu

"Come over here a minute."

I had just received a report from Miss Haruka, who was researching Rahxephon, the Goddess of Mercy.

Where had Quon gone off to?

Just then, Kim looked over at me.

"It's from the Foundation. They say they have found an important place and request we protect it."

From the Foundation? Why? I knew they were interested in data on Quon, but was it that important enough that they'd give orders to TERRA? It was true that we were able to operate thanks to donations we received from them, however, we were an officially recognized group under the sphere of the United Nations. It was no small matter if they side-stepped the United Nations and gave orders directly to us. According to what the commander had said, we had recently received a grant from the Foundation. Call it a grant, call it a bribe, either way the Foundation was strengthening their control of TERRA. But why? I'd have to look into that.

So, we'd have to put even more effort into finding Quon as quickly as possible. It was likely that she was the key to something. We might be able to use her as a trump card in our negotiations with the

Foundation.

"Expand the parameters of your search!"

2

The sticky waves rocked up and down.

I sat down on the side of the breakwater and thought about my mother. Had my mother really started the MU war? She was certainly a shade removed from normal, but had she been at the root of a war that would take billions of lives? I couldn't believe it. She was my mother.

Mr. Futagami had said my mom was swaggering about the Tokyo Government General like she owned the place, but I couldn't see her like that. She hadn't seemed the least bit interested in politics or power. Was she really the type to take pleasure in controlling other people?

No. But I couldn't end it at that. I didn't know what I thought anymore.

Just then I heard someone singing.

I looked and saw a little girl sitting on the opposite end of the breakwater, singing out at the ocean. What was she doing? Oh, wasn't that Quon? Her clothes made it look like she had broken out of the hospital.

"Quon."

I called out to her, but she didn't turn around. I approached her.

"What are you doing here?"

To get over to this end of the breakwater, she would have had to walk behind me, and I had been there for a while. There was just one narrow path, but I was so lost in thought, I would not have noticed if she'd

walked by.

"I found my...."

My what?

Quon turned around. She was smiling. She always looked sort of distant, and it might have been the first time I'd seen her like this.

"It taught me, Ollin."

"You mean me? What? What did you say you'd found?"

"I am Ollin, also."

Huh? What was she talking about? I'd never really understood why she called me Ollin, and now she was calling herself that, too? Now I was even more confused.

"Do you know what that song I was singing is called?"

I didn't know much about music, but I felt like I'd heard it somewhere before. What was it?

"It is the "Polovtsian Dance" from an opera called *Prince Igor* by Borodin. Do you know who the Polovtsians are? They're the Tartars, that is, the Mongols from what is now central Asia."

Quon was more verbose than normal. Why was that? Besides that, she seemed happy.

"The story is about when the Mongolian Empire was attacked by the Russians. It's an opera with Prince Igor, who fought bravely against the invading Tartars and Prince Galitzky, as its main characters. But you see, up until then, Russia had just been lots of small, warring tribes, not something you could call a nation. The principality of Moscow used the Tartars' attack as a ruse to make itself seem more powerful. You could say they united all of Russia that way. But the Tartars' rule was oppressive, and they say they still call it the Tartar Yoke in Russia."

Quon approached, her eyes staring intently at mine.

"In order to create something, you must also destroy something."

That reverberated in my heart. Just like the principality of Moscow, my mother had used MU as a ruse to make herself seem more powerful. What was she trying to make of Tokyo? What did she intend to do by controlling Tokyo Jupiter? What could she do that would affirm the destruction of two billion people's lives?

"Incidentally, for a career, Borodin was a professor of medicine at the Academy of Medicine in St. Petersburg, and he just wrote music on the side. And he died without ever completing *Prince Igor*. After his death, Rimsky-Korsakov and Glazunov worked together to complete it, and it was performed three years after Borodin's death. Do you see? There are things that won't be completed unless they can transcend their creator's will and take a lot of time."

What was she trying to say?

"It's just like the Xephon System. One is two. Two are one."

Xephon System? Is that Rahxephon? Is that what will transcend its creator's will? What won't be completed for a long time? What did that mean?

Just when I was about to ask her about it, sirens started blaring. The cell phone in my pocket started ringing, too. A D1 alert. A Dolem had appeared. Just as I was wondering what to do, I heard the sound of emergency brakes. Miss Haruka's car was stopped by the inland end of the breakwater.

"Hurry. I'll take you to the command center."

"Got it."

I shouted back in a loud voice, and turned to Quon.

"I've gotta go. You should go back to the hospital. Everyone's been worried."

I hurried off to Miss Haruka's car.

"Don't wander off on your own."

She got mad at me as soon as I got in the car. *On my own?*... Something must have been upsetting Miss Haruka. I wonder if she was still mad about before. Just as I was thinking of telling her I hadn't been rejecting her, she seemed to grow annoyed.

"Quon's gone off somewhere, too."

"What? But she was just ... with me...."

"What?!"

Miss Haruka hadn't heard me. She asked me about it, but I couldn't speak. Quon wasn't on the breakwater. The breakwater only had one path. If she had gotten off it, she would have had to go by the car.

Then how had she?...

"We're in a hurry!"

Miss Haruka started the car. I looked around, but I didn't see any sign of Quon anywhere. I wonder if I had dreamed her.

Fragment 6: Helena Bähbem

The pure black egg was growing blacker. It seemed to be making noise, and absorbing the light around it. The awakening was close. No, it might already have awakened.

I could hear faint singing from the egg. It was the "Polovtsian Dance."

Was that a good sign or was it a bad one? I could not decide.

It was just then that I received news that a Dolem had appeared.

"Uncle, a Dolem has appeared."

I was kneeling at Uncle Ernst's feet.

"Ah, so they're desperate, too."

"The egg and the tuner are calling for each other. They must have found this place through that."

His eyes narrowed slightly, and I moved reflexively.

"What is the location of the Dolem's appearance?"

"Exactly between here, Kalung Mutiara, and Niraikanai."

"That's a difficult place to interpret. But, even if they came after us, what could a mere Dolem do? Do not worry, my child."

"Yes, uncle."

It was all I could do to respond with a smile. The truth was, I wanted to get out of that room right away.

It was too cold.

3

From the command center, I was sent to the Rahxephon. Finally, flying at high speeds, I flew to a place where I could see the Dolem. Ms. Elvy and the rest of Squadron Alpha were already attacking the Dolem, which looked like a mushroom.

Right when I gripped the stick to head over and join in the action, I heard a voice that seemed to come from nowhere. It was Quon singing the "Polovtsian Dance." I looked around, trying to figure out where she was ... and I found her. She was floating in the water sur-

rounding the instrumentalist's seat.

Why was she there? Why was she floating in that? Wasn't I the only one who could come inside the Rahxephon? Was she a dream? No, she wasn't. My proof of that was that ripples were spreading on the surface of the water in time with her singing.

I climbed out of the instrumentalist's seat and carefully stepped onto the platform that stuck out of the water like an arrow at an angle. It was several meters to Quon.

"Quon! What are you doing?"

I called out to her, but she did not respond. She just kept on singing.

"Quon!"

I reached out a bit farther, but my foot slipped and I fell into the water.

It was pretty cold. It was about as cold as the fresh water that bubbled out of a mountain spring. I didn't understand how anyone could be lying in it with a calm face, singing.

"Ayato, what's wrong? Why are you just standing there?"

I could hear Megumi's metallic voice echo in my ears.

"Quon's in here!"

"Quon? Why?"

"That's what I wanna know."

"The Dolem's right in front of you!"

Did that mean I should leave her? What would happen if I got hit with an electrical attack, like I sometimes did? The water would electrocute her! The way she'd been acting, Quon seemed like she would just

keep singing while she sizzled. I had to save her.

Just then, the pitch of her singing raised and Quon's body lifted slowly into the air.

I lost the power to speak.

There was no defined ceiling in the space which held the instrumentalist's seat. There was just the vast darkness ... and she was floating up into it. No, there was one point of light in the darkness. Before I had time to consider that, it became a hole, and light poured out of it. It shone down on the hovering Quon.

She was leaving.

Hoping to get closer to her, I scrambled up the instrumentalist's seat and reached my hand out to her.

"Quon! Don't go!"

She must have heard me calling and stopped rising. She made a gesture as if she was grasping a large ball.

"Do you ... want to hold me?"

"What?"

"My egg."

As soon as the last of her words reached my ears, Quon was right in front of me.

"Ollin of Xephon."

Quon said smiling.

"If we're together, we can do it."

Do what? What are you saying?

Just then, the light poured down from above our heads. There was light right beside us, like the light that had shone down from the hole earlier. What I had suspected was a hole was indeed a hole. The room was



cut by the hole, and there were clouds in the space beyond it. The sky? No. We passed beyond the clouds, and were looking down at some part of the ground. Past the clouds, I could see something round floating. It was ... an egg?

The birthmark on my stomach hurt and felt as if it were bubbling up.

What was that? I had seen it before. It looked just like the egg of Rahxephon I had seen in the shrine on my last day in Tokyo.

I understood instinctively. That was the egg that was in Neriya Shrine. Someone had brought it out of the shrine, and hidden it in a place I did not recognize.

Quon began to rise into the air again. Up toward the hole. Up toward the egg.

"Quon!"

All I could do was jump up and cling desperately to her.

Quon Kisaragi 5

A pleasant rhythm, reverberating, resounding. Beyond that, I could see the sky. In that sky, there was an upside-down egg. I reached my hand out to it. Stretched.

My egg.

My egg.

My music.

My instrument.

Would it play a violent song or a quiet one? I put my hand through the hole. I put my body through.

"Quon! Stop!"

Don't stop me, Ollin. I am Ollin as well. Just as Ollin and Ollin are bound to each other, yet contrary, Ollin would not let me go, but clung tight and came with me. I could not be stopped. I couldn't be stopped. I stretched my hand out to the egg.

To the black egg.

Countless selves blessed me. They were reflected shadows. The great, dark, dew-winged egg that dominated the empty interior of the watery dome was my egg.

Not much longer.

Listen, I can hear the voice from my egg calling me.

Not much longer.

Listen, I can hear the voice from my egg calling me.

Not much longer.

Just then, I was hit by a violent shock, along with black lightning.

I was rejected.

I was rejected.

I was rejected.

I was rejected!

I was rejected by my own egg. Such a thing was not possible! This was a dream. This was a dream. This is a dream this is a dream thisisadreamthis....

As the black feathers rained down in the room, my consciousness melted away.

Fragment 7: Helena Bähbem

I forcibly relocated the phase vector of the egg. As a result, the quantum hole that was already forming was opened, and it was completely closed off to the interference waves from Quon.

That was fine.

"Don't meddle with the egg, Quon."

Quon had awakened, but it was not yet that time. *It is not Quon who will decide when the egg is ready to be incubated. It is my uncle. Everything must progress according to my uncle's plan.*

4

Quon, who had been laughing maniacally until then, let out a sudden scream and fell into my arms. Holding on to her, I fell into the instrumentalist's seat.

"Quon!"

It was no good. She was unconscious.

"Quon!"

She showed no response to my calls.

Wondering what I should do, I looked around, and a shadow fell over my face. The screen had grown dark on both sides, as if a curtain had been pulled over it. Did this mean the Dolem was trying to swallow us?

My anger welled up inside me.

It was all this guy's fault!

Quon had gone all funny because the Dolem showed up, I decid-

ed.

Using the strength of my anger, I swung my arms up.

They pierced through the Dolem from the inside.

Jumping out of it, I saw the mushroom-shaped Dolem toss and turn in the sky, screaming.

Raising the sword of light in my right arm, I cut the Dolem to bits.

The Dolem's scream echoed across the sky, as if it could pierce the setting sun.

Looking down, I saw that Quon was looking up at me.

She laughed quietly.

"I found my egg," she said, and pointed up.

But the hole Quon had tried to go through was no longer there.

There was only darkness.

What had happened?

The setting sun cast a red glow over us.

Fragment 8: Shinobu Miwa

Once again, the Mulian disappeared from the Performer's Stage with a soundless scream.

"Falsetto has disappeared."

While I sneaked a look, Ms. Maya must have noticed the uneasy tint in my eyes, because she laughed. Without realizing it, my shoulders jumped.

"That was foolish. She should have focused only on Ayato, but was dragged away by Quon and the tuning egg, was mistaken about the

point of appearance. Besides that, to try to take the Rahxephon along with Quon was arrogance."

Arrogance. With just that one word, Ms. Maya, who had the strength and coldness to cast off even her closest friends, had made me even more uneasy.

"Miwa, how is the Yo Meseta Pukeh?"

"It is working well. We have gone through three new metronomes today."

"Tokyo is moving closer and closer to becoming ours!"

Commander Kuki interrupted. *Can he do nothing but make unnecessary comments?*

"What would it matter to control Tokyo?"

Ms. Maya looked at Kuki with a cold expression.

"If you want it, I'll give it to you. It's just one little city."

She spat the words out. To Ms. Maya, Tokyo was worth no more than the Mulians. It was nothing more than a source of provisions until she completed the Xephon System. Something she would throw away once she no longer had a need for it.

Once I had thought that far, I realized my own future, since I was worth much less than Tokyo. My heart sunk.

No, I mustn't think that. Just like those living in Tokyo, I should think of the present. We must not think at all of the future or the past.

Fragment 9: Itsuki Kisaragi

"Doctor! The data!"

The data from the Rahxephon that had been cut off for a while

started coming in again as soon as the Dòlem was destroyed. But it was displaying data on both Ayato and Quon.

"Why is Quon on here?"

"Now is not the time to be reviewing it. Once Ayato is back, collect data immediately."

"Yes, sir"

She must have seen I was trembling. My voice was high when I had replied to her, too.

"Make one copy of the data you collect, and all the data from today, and then delete it from the computer.... If we leave careless records, the physiological research team from the Foundation might ask about it."

Nanamori gave a forceful nod. How well had I been able to hide my trembling? If she were allowed inside the Rahxephon ... that meant she'd awakened. I had predicted it, but now that it had happened for real, I was astonished.

It meant the permanent separation of myself and Quon.

Chapter Three: Human Specimen Number One

Fragment 1: Haruka Shitow

"At sundown on December 29, 2012, the force calling themselves MU suddenly appeared in Tokyo. Two hours later, the Great MU War began over the matter of some nuclear missiles set off by the American military in Japan. The damage spread even to us in Sendai, when on the 4th of January of the next year, we were the target of a destructive shock attack."

The announcement was made to the people riding in the moving box at the Great War Memorial Hall. He said it was considered part of post-War education, and the fact that these bases are built is proof that nothing can take away the national Japanese identity as builders. The fact that they would make something like the Great War into an amusement park must be tied to the fact that they will never forget the scars from it.

As I was thinking that, I heard *his* voice in my earphone.

"There was no teacher or graduate of Old Sendai Second Elementary School who does not remember a student called Quon Kisaragi. In addition, in regards to the rest of the data in the documents, nothing has been altered."

I was doing research on Quon Kisaragi. It was a formal request from the lieutenant commander ... that is, from Yagumo. It seemed he was thinking about it quite a bit, to deal with the interference from the Foundation.

As for *him*, he made various reports, including one involving his

questioning of the people living in the area where she was said to have resided during the Sendai Period, but did not get any definitive information.

"We believe that all of the records stating that Quon Kisaragi was in Sendai were faked."

I'm sure he was a great talent, but must we really approach this in such a complicated manner? To tell the truth, I breathed a sigh of relief when I finally walked out of the Memorial Hall. Between the memories that flooded back at seeing the exhibits, and the reports from *him*, my head felt like it was going to split in two.

I glanced over and noticed that *he* was standing by the exhibit of machines used during the Great War that was out in the open. I nonchalantly moved closer to the machines. Of course, *he* was long gone. It was just as we had planned. I opened the machine's service hatch, stuck my hand inside, and most of the envelopes came out. His reports were all here.

Not just about the Sendai Period, but all the information he had dug up in reference to Quon.

Who ... no, *what* in the world is Quon Kisaragi?

1

It was a typical morning in the Rikudoh household. Miss Haruka was back from a business trip, so we had four people around the table again. Miss Haruka must have been thinking about something because she didn't seem like she was all here.

"So, where did you go on your business trip?" Megumi asked,

and Miss Haruka started stirring her natto like she had just remembered it was there.

"Nara. It's been about five years since I was last there, but it hasn't changed much."

She looked nostalgic as she spoke of it. I looked confused, and Megumi picked up on that and explained for me.

"My sister was in Nara until she graduated from college. It must be nice to live alone and do whatever you want."

"Is Nara a nice place?" I asked, and a quick look of confusion flashed across her face before she started putting sugar in her natto, as if trying to evade the question. Sugar in her natto? That's no joke.

"Oh, she's started again."

Megumi looked really grossed out. She said again? Did she do this often?

Despite our reactions, Miss Haruka happily stirred her natto.

"It's good. You should try it, Ayato."

I should try sugar in natto?

"You're the only one who eats sugar in their natto, sis."

"You might not remember it, but everyone at Aunt Kayoko's place in Akita did it."

"But sugar?!"

"What? It's just sugar in natto. In Hokkaido, they put sweetened natto in red bean rice. You just have a limited range of tastes."

"That's just what people with bad taste say!"

Sugar in natto, huh? I guess I will try some.

I put a bit in to try and stirred it up. The natto tasted even stickier than usual. It was all right. There was no way to describe it except as

slightly sweet natto, but that unique smell had been diluted and it had a mild flavor. That was surprising. I thought the sugar would add more to the stench of natto.

"It's surprisingly tasty."

"What!?" Megumi nearly screamed.

"Good, isn't it?"

Miss Haruka leaned forward.

"Mayonnaise is pretty good on rice, too."

"Oh, and butter and soy sauce are good, too."

"You guys are weird!"

At Megumi's shout, Miss Haruka and I looked at each other and smiled. In that smile, all the ill feelings we'd felt toward each other recently melted away. Well, that is, all the ill feelings she'd had for me. I was happy.

Fragment 2: Itsuki Kisaragi

From the monitoring room, I watched the physiological research team from the Foundation taking samples of Quon's blue blood.

They may have been the very top level researchers, but when it came to Quon as a test subject, they were only second best. I had been worried about the super technology Bähbem had brought with them, but it seemed my fears were groundless. They could not confirm any data on the awakened Quon.

If I just kept the data from when Quon was found in the Rahxephon covered, there would be nothing the Foundation could do with her.

"Sleeping Beauty is already complete, is she?"

Sharp pain jabbed in me as Makoto spoke those words.

"Complete? You talk about her like she's a thing."

"If she weren't, she wouldn't be able to enter the Rahxephon."

"She only entered it. It's not like she made it move...," I said, more to myself than to Makoto.

"That's enough. It's worth making her do it again."

"I will decide what is enough. She's not ready."

"You Know Who's coming tomorrow."

"With his whip?"

I had intended it to be sarcastic, but he ignored me completely.

"He will want to see both of them."

"Both?"

"Ayato Kamina is also incomplete."

"He isn't like her. He'll rise to a new grade soon."

I saw cold eyes staring back at me from behind lightly-tinted sunglasses.

"Is that your prediction as a scientist? Or your wish as Itsuki Kisaragi?"

Your sarcasm is as acrid as ever.

Fortunately, Nanamori came in just then.

"Doctor, I've put the data to hand over to them in order, but something's strange."

"What is?"

"It's the human specimen list. Would you look at this first item? See, it says 1989."

Shit. It seemed a top secret item had somehow gotten mixed in

with the research files.

"I think it's most likely a mistake in data entry. We'll take care of it, so don't worry about it."

Makoto had intended to trick us into letting him have the file by saying that, but since he wasn't her direct supervisor, it seemed pretty unnatural for him to be saying it. And then there was the way he tried to grab them right out of her hands. *You've forgotten your position as an inspector for the United Nations, and that you aren't part of the Foundation. See, you've piqued Nanamori's curiosity.*

Well, that's fine. If this means TERRA will take more interest in Quon.... No, I'll stop expecting that. It's clear from TERRA and the Foundation's relationship that that is impossible.

2

I shivered from the wind blowing over the ferry. For some reason, the wind was cold.

Looking down from the deck, I could see inside the car, where Miss Haruka was looking intently over some reports.

"She sure looks busy," I mumbled to no one in particular, but Megumi answered.

"She likes her work."

"Doesn't she have a boyfriend or anything?"

I hadn't meant anything by it, but it wasn't something to ask her little sister. She made a sort of shocked and concerned look on her face.

"Not like that! I mean, she's good at her work, and she's pretty. She's a little careless sometimes, but ... you see...."

It was no use. The more I said, the more I sounded like someone who was interested in trying to find out more. Megumi looked more and more surprised. I really hadn't intended that....

"She used to have one. I answered the phone once when he called. My sister told me herself that she was dating him."

"What was his name?"

"He didn't say. He just asked if Haruka was there. Come to think of it, it was a sort of familiar voice, though."

"When was this?"

I was sounding more and more like a man in love with a married woman. But I just couldn't stop myself.

"It was when she was in college, before our last name changed. A long time ago."

"Ah. So Shitow is your new father's name?"

"Not our father. The man our mother married...." Megumi muttered quietly. Had I touched on a sore subject?

I sure hope the ferry gets there soon...

Fragment 3: Sayoko Nanamori

When I got to the lounge, Haruka and Hadhiyat were talking about something. What were they doing? *I think I'll tease them a bit.*

"More barbecue advice?"

"Oh, do you want to come, too, Sayoko?"

Haruka the honor student would never turn anyone down. But Hadhiyat the dishonor student would never hide her displeasure.

"There wouldn't be anything you'd want to drink."

"No? I like beer, too. And I'm not a bad drunk."

Even without hearing it from Haruka, Hadhiyat was famous for being a nasty drunk.

"The air's rotten in here. I'm going back to the hangar."

She stood up and walked quickly out. *I like how simple you are.*

"She doesn't seem to like me."

"Oh, that's not true."

Another typical honor-student response. *Should I give you a medal?*

"I don't mind being hated."

An uncomfortable silence. *It sure would be nice if she'd toss a bit of that honor-student perfection my way.... Well, she's too irritated for that.*

It's because she saw us in the monitoring room. But if you line up a man you feel sorry for and a man who embraces you, no one is going to be able to keep herself together. But by the monitoring room where we did it, I remember, I was suddenly ditched by Haruka.

"Sayoko ... about what happened before...."

Sounds like you're having a hard time getting the words out. If that's the case, it's better not to say it.

"Oh, I'm not bothered by it."

I was adult enough to get over it. *I am calculating.*

"But, that man is...."

"None of your business."

Shot down! I'm used to it, but the honor student doesn't seem accustomed to these uncomfortable silences. I wonder if I should help her along.

"Well, all right. But to seal our renewed friendship, I want you to tell me something."

"What?"

She looked happy, like a dog that had just been praised by its master.

"Human specimen number one."

"The first Mulian to have a confirmed MU phase response, you mean?"

"Is it true the record is from 1989?"

"That shouldn't be. That's twelve years before the MU even arrived."

"Yeah.... The human specimen was rescued from Tokyo Jupiter. If that's true, that would make it impossible."

"Yeah, it's not possible."

There was nothing in Haruka's voice to say she was lying, which meant this could be information that Intelligence didn't know about. But Itsuki and the white snake hadn't been surprised. What could that mean?

Oh ho ho! I've left too much of a gap in the conversation.

"Thanks, Haruka. You're a good friend."

"Of course."

Ugh. Hearing such an innocent honor-student-like response made me gag. I had a lot to think about. About Quon, Doctor Itsuki, and what the white snake had proposed.... *I have no time to chit-chat with you.*

I turned my back to her.

Fragment 4: Haruka Shitow

The record of the human specimen number one is dated 1989?
What did that mean? Where had Sayoko gotten that information? And why had she asked me, an intelligence officer, about it?

I guess she just wanted to find out if I knew about it or not. But then, what would that mean?

If Sayoko was taking these actions, it probably meant someone had shown her some information to incite her, and wanted to do something.

That was no good. If I put myself in that mode, I'd just keep trying to see the motives behind the motives behind the motives of everyone's actions. It was the bad habit of an intelligence officer.

Fragment 5: Jin Kunugi

I hate cats. I've hated them ever since I was a boy and saw a cat in my neighborhood holding a dead bird in its mouth. I hated that cats could contain an untamed, wild character with such a calm look on their face. Cat lovers say that's what they like about cats, but when they tell me that, I can't understand why they even keep cats, those stupid creatures.

Can't they even understand that I hate them? I've been chasing them away for ages, but they obstinately come back.

"It has been a long time, sir."

Mr. Rikudoh seemed healthy as always. I could not be unkind to his cat. It was troubling.

"It certainly has. The last time we met was...."

"We saw each other once right before Operation Overload."

"Five months, then. A long time, considering we live on such a small island."

The island was small, but he and I lived in different worlds.

"I'm sorry."

Shit. This cat was too friendly. It had climbed onto my lap.

"Not at all. Just think of it as society is small, but people are moving in different directions."

Society is small, but people move in opposite directions. And people's opinions differ.

"Is Watari doing well?"

"He came back from Russia last night, and...."

I took out the items that had been my reason for coming to visit the Rikudoh household.

"I was asked to give you these."

A matrioshka, some kimchee, and Trappist butter candies. They were all things that would make you think he'd shopped at a store that sold souvenirs from around the world. It was only natural that Mr. Rikudoh would force a smile.

"He seems busy as ever."

"Yes."

The cat had curled up into a ball in my lap. It was an impudent creature.

"What is Watari?..."

"Hm?"

"What is Watari planning to do with Ayato Kamina?"

It was a question I could not answer.

"No, it's nothing for you to worry about. But, he's a good kid. I'd feel bad if Watari was just using him."

"I see.... So you can spare that much for people."

At such a blunt statement, Mr. Rikudoh gave a worried smile.

"That's true."

"I'm sorry. I did not mean to complain about your line of work."

"I know.... Think of it as the complaints of a retired old man and forget about it."

Just then, I realized something.

A curled up cat is heavy.

3

Once all the tests were over, I changed clothes in a changing room in the advanced research room.

It was the same tests as always. To see the Rahxephon's reactions and stuff. The only difference was that it was Miss Sayoko directing it, instead of Mr. Itsuki. It's not that I think she's incompetent, but things were a bit weird.

I thought about that while I changed, but the curtain was suddenly thrown open, and Sayoko was there.

That was something I would call a bit weird. It seemed like she had left the curtain open long enough to rattle me.

"Good work. You seem pretty well used to it by now. Doctor Itsuki says you're remarkably adaptable."

"Where was Mr. Itsuki today?"

"He took Quon home."

"Oh, she's out of the hospital?"

I was glad. I'd heard she was unconscious for a while. And since she had lost consciousness in that condition, I felt a little bit responsible. I knew it wasn't my fault, though.

The smell of perfume was very strong. Before I had even noticed, Miss Sayoko had come right up to me.

"Why was Quon inside the Rahxephon?"

"I don't know myself. I just noticed she was in there."

Give me a break! I'm not good at these kinds of situations.

"I see.... So it wasn't a mistake in the data. Why don't you go see her on your way home? I'm sure she'd like that."

Sayoko moved away a bit as she said that.

"Good luck."

She left the changing room with those words.

"Th-thanks."

I had responded out of habit, but ... what was I suppose to have good luck with?

Fragment 6: Haruka Shitow

I'll try to get everything I've found out so far in order.

"Born April 17th, 2011 on Nirai Island. Although, because the server in the Kagoshima district was lost in a Dolem attack, the record was refiled in 2019. Quon Kisaragi moved to Sendai on December 29th, 2012. This record was also lost in the confusion following the war, and was re-petitioned in 2019."

On that day in 2012, I was at my mother's home. My mother was pregnant with Megumi.

"In 2019, Quon Kisaragi was eight years old. Her parents had died, and she was taken in by relatives."

I was in college. Classes and parties, flaunting that youthful energy only college students have, working quietly in the library. Papers written the night before they were due. And, Itsuki. Though, at that time he was still Mr. Itsuki to me.

The cicadas' song suddenly started up again.

"You're putting music into words?"

The night before, I had called my mother and taken notes before working as hard as I could to make a good lunch. Fried chicken, Hamburg steak, tomato salad, and the egg salad sandwiches Mr. Itsuki said he liked.

"That's right. Cheery songs, sad songs, gallant songs. Even if there aren't any lyrics, music carries a variety of messages. Putting those messages into words is my research topic."

His words sounded very enticing to me, and I was trying to act like I was as mature as he was. It was not much different from a literary girl being drawn in by a man talking about high-brow literary theory.

"So, you're like a music translator?"

"Ha ha ha. A music translator? I like that.... What are you thinking of doing after you graduate, Haruka?"

"I ... want to help the people in Tokyo."

Weeks and months passed in that fashion. Eventually Mr. Itsuki became Itsuki, and eventually we split up.

"In 2022, Quon Kisaragi was twelve. She moved to Nirai Island.... Nirai district, Kumage metropolitan area, Kagoshima prefec-

ture. She lived with her older brother, Itsuki Kisaragi."

It was around then that I returned to Nirai Island, to work for TERRA. I moved in with my uncle Rikudoh, along with my sister, who was not getting along well with our mother. Meanwhile, our mother moved to Kagoshima with her new partner.

"In 2027, Quon Kisaragi was seventeen. She was involved in Operation Overload...."

That was when I first learned of her existence. I was surprised to hear she was Itsuki's sister. He had never said a word about her while we were in college, and he hadn't said anything about their parents being dead. At the time he had said ... that his father was far away, I think.

The same went for Quon, but there was much I did not know about Itsuki.

I set the information files aside and let out a sigh.

Seven Nirai district, Kumage metropolitan area, Kagoshima prefecture. That is Quon Kisaragi's permanent address. Her permanent address was a random location and they could have put it anywhere.

But that was....

Wasn't that the shrine of Rahxephon?

Why had Quon chosen that as her permanent address? While searching for an answer to an unanswerable question, I stumbled across the part of the shrine that resembled the Okinawa Kikkou graves.

"Is this Seven Nirai district?"

Surprised by the slow voice, I turned around and saw Futagami, the reporter from Amato News.

"You again?"

Futagami had just appeared out of nowhere. I had met him several times before, and each time he had talked about things that seemed like they could be important, or not. I once turned down a request for an interview, though.

"And what do you have to tell me today?"

"Nah, this time I was hoping you'd want to buy an exclusive scoop off me."

"Sorry. TERRA doesn't pay enough for that. Unlike where you work."

"Ouch!"

Futagami fanned himself with exaggerated gestures. He must have been a jester in a past life.

"Well, forget about that and just listen. About the Bähbem Foundation, which sponsors the UN, and in turn, TERRA. Have you heard that its head has not changed since its founding?"

No one outside a very selective group was supposed to know that the Foundation provided funding for TERRA and the UN. He sure let surprises out smoothly.

"The Foundation's predecessor, the Naacal Firm, founded in 1576, was headed by Ernst von Bähbem. The name is certainly the same as the current head.... When I was in college, I had a friend who was the heir of the fourteenth generation. His name was Nizaemon. Everyone teased him cruelly. Even in Japan, names are passed on through generations.

"Do you know what was happening around 1576? The struggle for Dutch independence. The Naacal firm made money selling weapons to the Netherlands, that is, to Holland, and to Spain, who controlled

Holland at the time. They amassed a huge fortune in the blink of an eye, and that brings us up to today. Speaking of the Netherlands, they have some impressive painters."

I was not an art history major, and had no clue what he was talking about.

"Like Hironymus Bosch. The Naascal Firm has a painting of its head that is said to have been done by him. Bosch died a while before the company was founded, though. If it really is he who painted it, the portrait would be a great treasure for Holland. But the rumor is that Naascal is keeping it a secret. But that portrait and the current head look exactly the same. Same age, same face, everything. Isn't that interesting?"

I considered saying something. But when you layer rumors with analogies, like the idea that the pyramids were built by UFOs, and that there are alien corpses in American military bases, they all become truth.

It was stupid.

"That must sell well to TV and magazines. It's a step up from lake monsters," I said, and Futagami gave me an exasperated smile.

"You're a shrewd customer. Well, then, what do you think of this next one?"

What was it this time? A giant, official-looking envelope.

"It's the chart for human specimen number one."

Did that even exist? Isn't number one what Sayoko was talking about before? To my chagrin, I found myself suddenly curious about it.

Inside the blue envelope there was one thick chart. It looked just like the handwritten charts from before everything went digital.

"The chart for human specimen number one. Do you think that was cheap, Lieutenant Haruka?"

The information written in there was ... astonishing.

Fragment 7: Johji Futagami

Target Level Three took the bait.

I suppose I had Youhei Yomoda to thank. If he hadn't explained the TERRA net-system to me, I would never have been able to access the research facility's database. He'd thought he was explaining the net to an old man who didn't understand technology at all, but I'd been fighting to get information off the net since before he was even born.

Generally, the most tried-and-true method for hacking is exploiting the system's weakest area: people like Youhei. *It was a bit of luck that you were careless, thinking you were dealing with a novice. I remembered every key you touched.*

I couldn't access the data in the most important databases. It was all information I was controlling. For starters, at least, I falsified the records to make the human specimen number one into a certainty. I thought target Level Six might take the bait, but that was just luck. When I looked at the earlier information on target Level Three, it was certain that the information from target Level Six had spread to three.

Well, this is where the real fun starts. How far would this information spread? Making sure it did was my job.

Fragment 8: Jin Kunugi

I was just in the middle of organizing some documents in the

commander's office when Souichi came in.

"It seems Mr. Futagami has had contact with Miss Haruka."

"About what?"

"Unfortunately, I do not know that. But it's possible we'll be getting a report from Miss Haruka."

"What do you think?"

"What do I think? Well, the unauthorized access that Mr. Youhei reported decided it."

That might be. Even though there was the danger of being discovered, he did like his parlor tricks.

"Also, this came from administration."

I opened the folded sheet of paper, and saw it was a report that the charts on the human specimen number one had been lent out. The ID number of the person who had borrowed them was, surprisingly, my own. If I had not made an order to be contacted if said charts were moved, it would have been handled as daily business, and would have taken quite a bit of time for the information to reach me.

This was not a good thing for Souichi to know. I would handle it. All Souichi needed to know about was the ID.

"Tell administration to tighten up their ID practices."

"Yes, sir."

"And the identity of the investigation must be guarded from Lieutenant Shitow, so don't notify her of the unauthorized access incident."

"Yes, I'll take care of it right away, sir."

Hearing that, I coughed slightly.

That was because Souichi had become close to me. That was the

path of doubting people, using them as pawns, lying, and back-stabbing. Since then I had deceived myself, taking the path I could walk. I was trying to make Souichi walk that path as well.

Even *I* thought I was a cruel human being.

But it was far beyond manipulating the feelings of individuals. We had to respect the path we had begun to walk.

Fragment 9: Sayoko Nanamori

I had to wait. Even now, I was still the woman everyone kept waiting. What a life.

When the charts I'd pulled out were beginning to get warm, he finally showed up.

"Sorry I'm late."

I wanted to glare at him, but I didn't change my gaze at all. *Who would bother to glare at you? You're not even worth that.*

"The usual," he said, sitting down.

"A stirred vodka martini. What a ladylike drink."

"A Bloody Mary. A drink for a lady of firm morals."

Humph. Irony was always good.

"Do you have it?"

At his prompting, I pulled a small envelope from my bag.

Inside was the data from when Quon appeared inside the Rahxephon. I didn't know what it meant, but Doctor Itsuki was trying desperately to keep it a secret. If this information fell into this man's hands, Quon would be....

Just as he reached out for it, I whisked it away.

"I wonder if Doctor Itsuki is all right."

"Trust me. Do you think I'd do anything to frame him?"

He held his hand out again. I pulled it away again.

"Just leave all that to me. I don't want to cause trouble for you.

Isn't getting rid of her our common goal?"

I hesitated.

If I handed this over, there would be no going back. There would be nothing to do but fall to the pit of hell with this man.

Even if it got out that I had slept with him, I could find some excuse. I could cry and beg for forgiveness. But if this got out, Doctor Itsuki would never forgive me. Even if I was doing it to protect him, should I really go that far?

"You don't have to if you don't want to."

His gaze, impassive as a reptile's, met mine.

"We are prepared to get that data, even if it means using less refined methods. But if it came to that, I would not be able to guarantee the safety of your beloved doctor."

I had no choice. I slid the envelope to him with a sigh.

Isshiki cut open the envelope and took out the yellow storage disk. Even though the bartender was standing right there.

"You're bold."

"Doesn't matter."

I glanced over at the bartender. He nodded slightly. I see. So that was how it was. As long as he received his reward, he was on Isshiki's side.

I'd have to use that next time I wanted to talk shit about Haruka.

"Shall we go?"

"Where?"

The corners of his mouth twitched and he pulled out a hotel room key.

I see.... I had come this far, so I might as well stick with him to the end. *Eat the plate with the poison*, as they say. Some were destined to fall ... that is what I thought then.

It was only much later that I realized there was much farther to fall.

4

It wasn't just because Sayoko had told me to, but I did stop by Mr. Itsuki's place on my way home.

I reached out to ring the bell, but the door opened.

"I thought it would be you, Ollin."

It was Quon. I didn't know what you were supposed to do when you had come to pay a visit to a sick friend, only to find that friend cheerfully answering the door. This time, she wasn't wearing an outfit that looked like she had just escaped from the hospital, but rather was dressed in her usual combination of purple clothes and her life-module.

"H-hi. You getting back into the rhythm of things after being in the hospital?"

"Rhythm? Like the beat of music?"

Good. She was back to normal. It had been weird seeing her so talkative.

"Perfect timing. I was in the mood to play violin today. Will you listen to me?"

She wanted to play violin? While I was trying to figure out what that meant, I was shown inside. Well, that was fine.

There was already a visitor in the living room.

Miss Haruka was there. She looked at me with a surprised and worried expression.

"Oh, Ayato. Did you come to see Quon? I'll just leave you two."

I thought she sounded unnatural, but Mr. Itsuki stopped her.

"You can stay a bit longer."

It looked like she shot him an angry look, but I might have been mistaken.

"Quon, would you mind playing on the veranda? We have things to discuss."

"All right, brother. The violin wants to be played outside anyway."

Prompted by Quon, I headed for the veranda. Glancing back at Miss Haruka and Mr. Itsuki, I saw they both wore very serious expressions. I guess they had adult matters to discuss.

A fresh sea breeze blew over the veranda. The sound was carried up on the breeze, quietly rising to the heavens. She played in such a way that I felt I could see the delicate sounds became solid and then mix together with the clouds.

The piece was, of course, the "Prolovtsian Dance." I had listened to her music before, when Mr. Itsuki offered to play me a recording, but seeing her perform before me, I wondered what that sound was. Her music was so rich, and powerful, and delicate.

As the last note melted into the blue sky, it also sunk into my

soul. It was the coming of a special, contented silence that came after the end of a magnificent piece of music. I didn't know much about music, but I understood with every fiber of my essence that Quon played magnificent music.

After a few moments, I clapped, and Quon smiled happily.

"You try playing, too, Ollin."

"I can't. I don't know how to play any instruments...."

"You're a performer. You should be able to play."

Memories of unpleasant words welled up inside me. Performer. I'd heard that somewhere before. Where was it? That's right. When I had the illusion of being in Kichijoji from the psycho-wave attack by that Dolem, my mom had said that word. "Performer."

"Ixtli wishes it as well."

Performer, Ixtli, Ollin. What did Quon know?

"Hey, what's something that will transcend its creator's will and take a lot of time?"

"Huh?"

It was clear by her face that she had no clue. She must have been feverish then. But she had been speaking coherently, and was full of confidence. She might have forgotten it, but she certainly had understood it at the time. Understood something I did not.

Fragment 10: Haruka Shitow

I heard Quon start playing a second piece on the veranda.

Itsuki and I were still sitting in silence.

Our tea was getting cold. The time we had together was getting

cold.

"So...." I finally opened my mouth.

"What is she?"

"She? Who do you mean?"

You ought to know.

"I never heard back then that you had a sister. Or even that your parents died."

"Back then.... I had a lot going on."

"Don't try to avoid the issue."

"You're avoiding the issue, too."

What? But when I looked at Itsuki's face, he was just smiling bitterly.

"Why did we break up?"

Oh, that. But that was long past.

"That's done. Past tense."

"More like past perfect. Well, maybe not to me."

His words sounded like he was half-joking, but his eyes were serious. *Stop it. Your feelings for me hurt me.* I looked away, and heard him sigh.

"Fine. I know ... that's why you joined TERRA."

I heard the sound of cicadas once again.

I wish I could go back in time to that day. If I could, then I wouldn't have to hurt him now.

Was I deceiving myself?

That day, I had intended to take a new step. To change everything. *Had I been deceiving myself? I didn't know. I don't know, so I'm spending time here feeling awkward with Itsuki.*

"Time has not progressed for Haruka Shitow since 2012. You thought TERRA would make it start again."

I hadn't been that confident. I had simply wanted to help the people in Tokyo. But looking back at it all, I wasn't sure if it had been so simple. But that was second-guessing.

"I couldn't make it start."

"It wasn't your fault."

Even though I knew I was hurting him, It could be no other way. The more he was hurt, the more I was. But, despite that, I couldn't give in without saying it.

"Even so, I wanted to make it start."

There were small ripples in our cold tea.

Itsuki stooped down and hugged me from behind.

My heart ached at the familiar feeling.

I smelled his fresh, earthy scent up close for the first time in ages.

It reminded me of those days. That lost time between child and adult returned to me.

"I'm always just a substitute. No matter where I go."

"Don't say that."

When he occasionally showed me this self-destructive side, I used to get angry, but not anymore. *Enough time has passed for that, Itsuki.*

"I've changed since then."

Stop it. But I was losing the strength to turn him down.

"You've changed, too, Haruka."

I am not like I was back then. The girl who looked up to you has

gone away somewhere. No, even then, had I really looked up to you?

But he won't change.

I started to cry.

He won't change. He won't change. He won't change. He won't change. I repeated it over and over again in my mind like a litany, but its magic never took. Stopped time would not fly.

The strength drained from my body. It was Itsuki who stopped me from falling. He pressed his lips to mine.

Sweet memories replayed in my heart.

A feeling of numbness rose from the very core of my body.

But.... I couldn't.... I pushed him away.

"Stop it...."

If I didn't stop him, I would be carried away by this feeling. I would give myself up.

"Please...."

It was then that Ayato appeared in the doorway to the living room. He had seen us and was looking at us with surprise in his eyes. There was nothing I could do but glare at him.

Itsuki also looked at him coldly.

Time had frozen for the three of us. It was encased in ice that no one could thaw.

No one averted their gaze.

I could not breathe.

Just when I thought time had stopped forever, Quon upset the balance.

"Huh? What's everyone doing?"



Ayato was the first to move.

He looked away from me for a second, then gave me another questioning look.

No. It's not like that. The words I wanted to say were stuck in my throat.

Then, gradually, as if in slow-motion, Ayato turned around.

"Wait!"

But Itsuki caught hold of my arm with a grip strong enough to bruise.

"Let him go."

Ayato walked out. Itsuki held me back. I was torn between them. The living room was lit by the setting sun.

This was....

The players were different, but the scene was just the same as that one, so long ago. Is this what they call the irony of fate? There was no such thing.

"Let go!"

Itsuki shook his head. Looking into his intense eyes for just a second, my heart froze over.

"You did that on purpose so he'd see! You did that to hurt him! To hurt me!"

Shaking off his hold, I followed after Ayato. Behind me, Itsuki attempted a sad smile, but his lips just distorted into a grimace.

There was no reason to. I hadn't done anything wrong. It was their fault for doing that there.

So, why *was* I running?

I didn't know. I didn't know, but I knew I couldn't *not* run. But, in order to deal with the violent emotions that had been born within me, I had to run until my sides ached.

I was suddenly by the ocean. I threw myself down on the beach. My breath came out in ragged gasps. But the violent emotions were still running rampant in my heart, calling for me to run, to keep on running. *If you don't, we'll destroy you*, they said.

The sun hurt my eyes. I wished I could burn up in it.

Suddenly, a shadow loomed over me, blocking the sunlight. It was Miss Haruka standing before me, staring straight into the sun. I got up quickly.

"You just ran off. I was looking for you."

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologizing?"

She was right. There was no reason for me to be sorry. Why had I said that?

"I'm the one who should say sorry. I did that while I knew you were there."

My heart ached. What was this feeling? Whether or not she knew my feelings, Miss Haruka sat down beside me, close enough that we were touching.

"What did you think?"

Wh ... what did I think? What should I say? Miss Haruka saw I

was confused, and laughed.

"I shouldn't tease boys."

Had she been teasing me? It was more from humiliation than embarrassment that my cheeks burned red.

"We--Itsuki and I--have been dating since we were in college."

Miss Haruka said, staring off into the distant horizon of the ocean.

"He was one year above me at Nara University. We weren't in the same clubs or anything, but whenever we met on campus, I would think of what a wonderful man he was, and...."

She sounded disinterested, instead of happy, as she told me how they had met and fallen in love. But none of it reached me.

"I heard he entered TERRA after graduation, so I...."

Oh. So, that was it. She had entered TERRA to follow him. That's how they stayed together.

"So, that's how we started spending more time together. I'm not going to ask you to keep it a secret. But I don't want you to broadcast it either. You know?"

She smiled at me. Another thing to carry around inside me. I didn't have room for this. I couldn't even understand why I was feeling so down, so how could I be expected to think of others, too?

Miss Haruka lightly clapped a hand on my shoulder and stood up.

She left without another word and I was left alone on the beach.

Fragment 11: Haruka Shitow

I left him alone on the beach.

That was for the best. It was for the best. I told myself this over and over again. If I hadn't done this, I would have thrown myself at his feet.

At first, I had intended to clear up his misunderstanding. There was nothing between me and Itsuki. I wanted to tell him we used to go out, but now there was nothing between us. But, when I got there, I thought it might be best to let him keep misunderstanding.

That was best. If he thought Itsuki and I were dating, he wouldn't have to carry that heavy load.

No, that wasn't it. That was a lie. Really, I didn't want to hurt anymore. Like Aesop's fox. I had convinced myself the grapes that were out of my reach were sour. But what was wrong with that? It was much better than jumping for grapes you couldn't reach, then falling and hurting yourself on the ground.

I really was Aesop's fox. I had gotten good at deceiving myself. It seemed that was what it meant to be an adult here....

Fragment 12: Johji Futagami

Isshiki had called me to meet at our usual bar. It had a bad atmosphere.

"Have you ever seen this before?"

It was a big, blue envelope. *Crap.*

"No, never. What is it?"

That was how I made a living. I wouldn't be able to hold out much longer if everything was jolted, one by one. But this white man did not buy my act for one second.

"It's the chart for the human specimen number one."

There it was. I guess he'd start telling me its top secret contents next.

"Ah, do you mind?"

I held my hand out for it, but he said nothing. I guess he knows the contents have already been leaked. Even so, I feigned surprise when I pulled out the charts.

"Quon Kisaragi. That girl is...."

Oh, I wonder if I sounded too obvious there. Well, we were both just pretending.

"Within six hours there were signs it had been taken outside."

So, they were watching it that closely. I had used Kunugi's ID for the request. I had no reason at all to suspect it. Which means that little baby Yomoda had let me see what he typed in the keyboard as a trap.

I hated knowing I was being manipulated.

Was this man the one controlling everything? If he were, I wouldn't be meeting with him, I bet. He's probably getting information from somewhere, and came from meetings with them. Does that mean that the one behind it all is Kunugi? Or Watari? Or both?

Fragment 13: Jin Kunugi

"I pretended to mistakenly send the email for you to Isshiki, and told him about the charts."

"Did you?" Director Watari nodded contentedly.

"I told you we could use Futagami."

"But now he'll realize we were manipulating him. How will he

act now that he knows? There are too many uncontrolled elements."

"We don't want our cornered rat to bite the cat. I'll let you keep that in moderation.... Shougo was doing well, as always, I trust?" The director changed the subject, to cut off any objections from me.

"He was well. He told me to tell you that Ayato Kamina is a good boy."

"I should go see him, while I'm here. How is the luggage?"

"It should be packed before the day is out."

"I see. That is a bother."

In front of Lord Bähbem he had said, "Please entrust the operation to us," but he must have actually thought of it as a burden. That the Foundation would make that kind of investment meant that TERRA was falling increasingly under their control, and that our identity was being taken.

We would have to act much more carefully with this than with Isshiki and Futagami.

Would good fortune or bad come of this decision?

"God only knows," Director Watari responded, as if he had read my mind.

Those words weighed heavily upon me. *God only knows.* Anyone other than God could only struggle.

Fragment 14: Megumi Shitow

What?

What was going on?

This murky ambiance was just like the bottom of a swamp, covered in early spring slime.

Everything had been going so well at breakfast.

But by dinnertime our house felt like it was full of students getting ready for their big exams.

It was too stuffy!

Say something, Haruka Shitow! Ayato Kamina!

Why are you two both just staring in silence?

Ah! My sister was doing something weird again! She was putting mayonnaise on rice! Ugh.

"Sis, cut that out! Some people in this household are easily influenced!" I said jokingly, smiling at Ayato.

But they just kept eating in silence.

Wouldn't he copy her like he had that morning?

Put mayonnaise on his rice, like he had put sugar in his natto before?

It was as quiet as when you are dragged off to spend the evening with relatives you don't know.

All right! Now I'm gonna get this place in good spirits in one go!

I put gobs of mayonnaise on my rice.

Then I stirred it and ate some.

"Eww! This makes me wanna puke!"

Silence. What a cold reaction.

Even eating something gross didn't liven up the mood.

Between hating myself for playing the clown, and the awful aftertaste in my mouth, I was in a horrible mood..

Someone, do something!

The Chapter of the Children's Night

Nighttime belonged to us children.

"This way!"

Leading the way, I showed Itsuki around.

"It's a good thing we didn't invite Helena, huh?"

"I can't stand her."

We were in an old, old mineshaft on the island. A long time ago, they used to dig things out of here, but now it wasn't being used. Going deeper and deeper, there was a place adults couldn't enter. It was just for kids.

"It kinda stinks."

"Yeah."

Just as Itsuki said, it smelled strange, like mold and poop.

"Hurry up."

I pushed Itsuki into the narrow final tunnel. I followed after him. When we came out of the tunnel, we were in a wide open space. He was in there.

I looked at Itsuki, who was standing there without saying a word. That's true. When I first found this guy, I was so surprised I nearly peed myself.

"Don't be afraid."

I walked calmly up to him. I was feeling good. I couldn't compare to Itsuki and Helena in studies or music, but I wasn't afraid. It was a piece of cake. But when he looked at me with his big, dull eyes, my heart leaped a bit.

"Here. Eat up."

I put a big lump of clay I had picked up in front of him. Even though I spent all of my playtime looking, all I had found were some pieces about as big as my balled-up fist. He turned his eyes toward the clay. I heard a squealing noise, and then the clay shook and rocked and was sucked into his body. In a flash it had become part of him. His body looked like a big round loaf of bread with an eye. But parts were missing on the bottom. Probably he had hit something and it fell off while he was running here.

"Are you afraid?"

I turned around to face Itsuki.

"No, not really."

He said that, but he hadn't moved from where he was before. Ha ha, how funny!

"It's all right. Don't be afraid. As long as you don't surprise him, he's not bad."

"How do you know?"

"I heard his song!"

We had met through a song. One night, I had been fighting with Helena and I ran away from the mansion. I ran into the mineshaft, and went really far inside. That's when I heard it: his song. Drawn in by it, I kept going deeper and deeper. If I hadn't heard him, I would never have gone there. I came out in a wide open place. There were lots of things lying around. Their undersides looked like dolls made of mud, but they were really big. They were all falling apart and breaking. They must have been something the owner of the mansion had created.

The ceiling was broken, and the moon shone down through it.

He was under a shaft of moonlight. His one eye was looking up at the moon, and he was singing sadly. He was crying that he wanted out of there. That's how we met.

"Touch him."

"Don't wanna."

"It's all right!"

I grabbed Itsuki's hand and made him touch it. Just then there was a loud, happy noise. It was like a much prettier version of the tuning fork that teachers used. Along with this sound, a faint light spread across him. It was all very pretty.

Itsuki pulled his hand away in fear and looked at me, silently asking if it was OK. I nodded and he held out his hand, shaking, to touch it. The happy sound came again. Itsuki trailed his finger across it and little flashes of light went off along with notes that were like music. Itsuki smiled happily.

"He's hurt real bad."

"Yeah, but if you give him clay, he'll heal."

I stroked his broken parts. There was no sound from them. There were just pebbles.

"Where is that clay from?"

"I'll show you next time," I said, and then a bright light shone on us. I heard Helena's voice from the middle of the light.

"I knew it! The back flower beds, isn't it?"

Helena was standing there holding a flashlight.

"It's all stained with Max's tinkle there. It must have worked."

Helena was obsessed with magic. All she read were the Parakelethus or whatever they were called books. So there wasn't any dog

pee.

"Don't shine the light on him!"

But Helena never stopped anything because I told her to.

"I noticed you two were missing, and here you are. I'll tell master. He'll kill that thing."

Helena smiled nastily. No. I wouldn't let them do that. I sang. Helena folded and went mute. *Look, you've peed yourself.*

He responded to my song. He focused his eye on Helena and lit up. Then the rock right next to Helena broke into bits. Helena and Itsuki were both scared stiff.

"If you tell, I'll sic him on you and make him eat you."

"Humph, try it, if you can," she said, but her voice was quavering.

2

It was time for bed. We all slept in the same room. But Itsuki and I couldn't sleep. We were still too excited about whether he had understood us. I hadn't thought he would blast that rock next to Helena like I was hoping. He had listened to me. I was so happy about that, I couldn't sleep.

"I was surprised today."

"It was Helena's fault."

When I said that, Helena, who I thought was asleep already, lifted her head.

"That thing's a demon."

She had been reading her magic books with a flashlight under

the covers. What a sneak....

"But it is strange. I've never read about a living creature that eats clay."

"What do you know?"

Not everything was in books. Not everything not in books was a lie. Would he call it a demon next?

I knew it was a mistake as soon as I said it. I knew it, but it was too late. Helena swelled with anger and stood up on her bed.

"What do you know?! You're just a D!"

Don't call me a D! You don't know how much it hurts to be called that.

"Itsuki and I are Bs. As a D you have no right to talk to me like that!" Helena said and took her riding crop off the wall and pointed it at me.

"The only one in this estate who will listen to you is that big lump of dirt!"

Helena was really getting into it, and put on an acting voice.

"It is an injured demon, and I shall defeat it, in the name of Bähbem!"

"It's not a demon!" I said, but my voice cracked.

I wanted to say something back, but if I said something now, Helena would tell the teachers about him. I lay face down on my bed, hiding my face in my long hair, and endured the pain. No way was I going to let Helena see me crying.

Helena finally quit swaggering about and went to sleep. Quietly, so we wouldn't wake her, we wrapped ourselves in blankets and went out onto the veranda to look at the moon.

"Why do you think Helena is like that?"

"You shouldn't say bad things about people."

Itsuki looked in at her sleeping to make sure she hadn't heard.

"She's gotten meaner since then."

"Then?"

"They say Helena is related to the master. I wonder if it's true."

"No, she was mean before then."

Since Itsuki had said it, I wanted to burst out laughing. We both hurried to cover our mouths.

"I'm ... not like you two. The teachers told me. They said I'm more like a normal child than you."

"They did say that."

"I wonder what my parents are like."

Itsuki didn't say anything.

"They're out there somewhere. I'm sure they're out there somewhere waiting for me."

For just a short while, Itsuki had a really sad look on his face.

"Yeah. They must be."

"Someday I'm gonna break outta here and go see them."

Someday I would break out of there. Definitely.

3

The next day, the butler made us observe nature in the gardens as punishment for oversleeping. The teachers were out on business. Only Helena was awake on time and didn't have to write a report. *Jeez*. She was on duty, so she should have woken us up. It was unfair.

From morning 'til dusk, with lunch as a break, Itsuki and I wandered around the gardens. They were really big. They were big enough that you could easily spend a day walking around in them. Once we started our nature observations, one day wouldn't be enough to finish.

We walked home complaining about it, and found the mansion in an uproar. Men in black battle suits were filing into the basement. What was that?

I had a really bad feeling about it.

"They've found him!"

Itsuki nodded. It must have been Helena. Helena had done something to him. To my friend!

We quickly crept into the wine cellar. I knew a way that led from there to the mineshaft.

"Hurry up!"

"Wait, Makoto."

"Don't you care if they kill him?"

We ran. We heard a rat-a-tat-tat like pounding on a little drum. Then we heard something that sounded like a scream. It was him! They'd found him! They were going to kill him! We ran along the night path. Along the children's path. And, finally we found him. Just as we came out of the narrow passage and into the wide open space, there he was.

They were shining bright lights on him, and he was wailing. When I looked over, I saw the men in battle suits were holding machine guns pointed at him.

"Stop!"

I tried to throw myself between them, but Itsuki grabbed me from behind to stop me. *What are you doing?! Let go!*

Just then I heard a really low sound, and orange beams of light hit his body. His crying grew louder. His body crumbled away where the light hit. *Stop. Do you know how hard I'd worked to heal him even that much?*

"Stop!"

I shouted as loud as I could, but I was drowned out by the sound of the machine guns. No. I couldn't watch him be killed. That's it. I could control him with a song.

I sang.

I think that was the best I've ever sung in my life. Even the really tough teachers who said I was always out of tune would have praised me if they had heard me then. He definitely heard it. He heard it and understood.

Although he was falling apart, his body glowed. Even when he was shot by the machine guns, he continued to brighen. That's it! Come on, get them back for everything you've suffered. Do like you did to Helena.

His eye glowed.

A huge beam of light was shot off into the opening of the mine-shaft.

Cool!

Once the beam of light had passed, everything was quiet. The guys in battle suits must have been defeated. *Awesome!* He was so powerful.

It was quiet. Itsuki and I were riding on his back, flying. The gentle moonlight pouring in through the broken roof blanketed us in light. It no longer smelled like mold, but instead like running water. I never knew the mineshaft was this wide. No, we weren't in the mineshaft anymore. It was more like an old ruin. Even so, it was really big. Though we'd been flying for a while, there was no exit we could see. We could only see by the gentle moonlight pouring in.

"I see something."

Itsuki had been looking at the ground, and nearly fell down when he leaned over for a better look. He quickly righted himself.

"That was scary!"

"What did you see?"

"There was water running, and something, maybe a big stone statue, fallen over. It looked really old."

"What about his injuries?"

"I think it's too late to heal them."

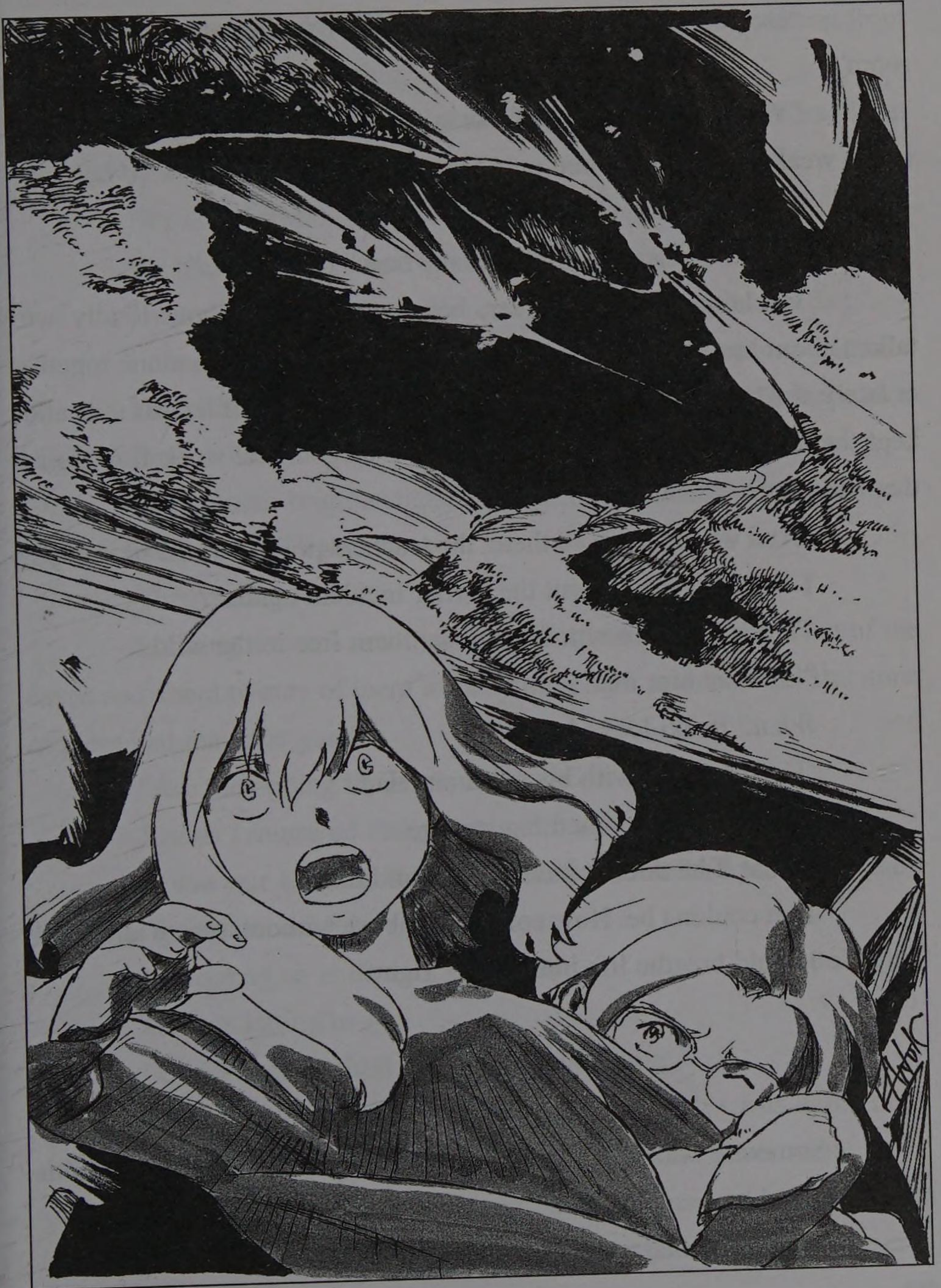
That's what I thought. If I'd been hurt as much as he had, I'd be crying and crying. But he was quiet, and just carried us as he flew. What a great guy.

"There's so much water ... this must be an underground spring."

"The teachers once said that the very deepest part of the basement was connected to the entrance of a grotto."

"Yeah, I remember that."

If we kept following the water like this, we might eventually be led out somewhere.



"Do you remember that time before, when the bats got lost in our room?"

"Yeah, they suddenly flew in through the window. They were really weak and they grabbed onto Helena."

"And she tried to burn them."

"That surprised me. I guess she hasn't changed...."

We laughed without fear, because no matter how loudly we talked about her, she couldn't hear us. Plus, we hadn't been alone together lately and had lots of things to say. Like that she cut off lizards tails and kept them, or that she tore the bottoms off dragonflies, stuck flowers in them and threw them.

"And when we saved them, the teachers praised us the next day."

I started talking about the earlier incident again.

"That's right. They told us to set them free in the wild."

"Let's set him free."

What? Itsuki looked at me.

"He should be with his mom and dad."

But Itsuki said something strange.

"What if he doesn't have a mom and dad?"

That couldn't be. How could he be born without a mom and dad? Only God could breathe life into clay ... right?

5

Someone was singing. Who was it? The voice sounded both happy and sad.

I awoke to that song. It seemed I had fallen asleep without real-

izing it. Even once I woke up, I could hear the voice. It was coming from underneath me. He was singing.

Looking around, I saw the total darkness from before had been relieved by a faint sliver of moonlight.

"It's the outside!"

We had finally crossed the underground spring.

"Just a little bit farther. We're almost to your mom and dad."

I encouraged him. As if he understood, he sped up just a little.

The wind blew softly against my cheeks. I couldn't believe how bright the moon was.

But a much brighter light was shining below us. One ... two ... three ... five points of light.

They'd found us.

Looking down, I saw the men in battle suits had come out of the caves and about twenty of them were shining light at us at once. But none of them had machine guns.

"Are they going to attack us?"

Just as I muttered that, we saw the white figure of a man.

It was our teacher. He had come back. He had probably heard what was going on and hurried back.

He looked up at us with kind eyes.

He was letting us go.

"Good-bye, teacher! Thanks for everything!"

I decided then and there to leave the island. If I was with him, I could go anywhere. Even off the island, to a world I'd never seen.

All the lights pointed at us turned off at once.

Just then, he screamed. He started a song that sounded like cry-

ing.

Why?

I saw that there was a little bit of light in the east.

The night was ending.

Our time was ending.

No! Not yet! Stay tonight, at least until we got off the island! Stay the magic time! Please! Please!

But the morning light did not stop.

As if the light hurt him, his back began to shake, and pieces the size of my head crumbled off him.

"What's the matter? Stay strong! Just a little bit farther. Then you can meet your mom and dad!"

I encouraged him as much as I could, but it seemed he couldn't hear me anymore. He was just screaming at the pain from the morning light.

I thought we were pretty high, but soon we hit ground. Tree branches stuck through him and bigger chunks fell off. He screamed each time.

And then we were left alone in the woods.

A white dream.

I was surrounded by people I didn't know.

"...oor thing."

"...eel bad."

"...or boy."

"This boy is version 3.02."

"You've expanded his life span, right?"

"Poor thing."

"It's a pitiful life."

"It would be better to have a shorter life."

"Yes, that might actually be better."

"I feel bad for him."

"Poor thing...."

"Poor th...."

"Poor...."

The voices of the people grew distant.

I was in a shallow pond up to my knees, crying aloud. He had used the last of his strength to make sure we got to the ground safely. But then he fell apart.

Itsuki and I were pulled out of the pond.

The broken off pieces of his body sunk into the pond with loud noises. They mixed with the water and formed into runny clay. He had turned back into mud.

Our clothes and bodies were covered in mud. I didn't worry about that, and just kept crying.

"Just a little bit ... more ... your mom and dad...."

"He can't live anymore."

It was a cold voice. Our teacher's voice.

"Not outside the mansion's grounds. And that pile of clay doesn't have a mother or father."

No mom and dad?! That was impossible. Did that mean someone made him? The master? It couldn't be that all the things that looked like broken dolls along the mineshaft, that they were all created by him?

That's why Itsuki had said that.

I looked at him, and saw he looked sorry. He had known.

"Am I the same?"

I asked my teacher, but he didn't reply.

"Do I not have a mom or dad either?"

That was the loneliest feeling in the world.

The mud that had been his body was as hard as concrete when it dried. It wouldn't even dissolve in water. I had had to cut my hair off with the dried-in mud.

I had liked my hair and had grown it out long ... but it didn't matter anymore.

Snip.

The scissors cut.

My hair fell with the mud.

The teacher explained as he cut my hair.

"You are different from the other two. But you are a specially chosen type."

Snip.

"Your parent was the master. That's something to be proud of."

Snip.

"Someday, the time will come for you to go out into the world."

Snip.

"Just wait for that time...."

Snip.

Snip.

I never grew my hair out again.

My desire to meet my parents faded with age. I didn't think I was lonely anymore. I had found what I had to do. But I never forgot that voice. His weeping voice. I can never throw that aside.

The lumps of mud that hardened in my hair when I was young.

They say the first human was made from mud. I wonder if the dolls that returned to dirt got to meet their parents. That was something nobody knew.

The sea breeze on Niraikanai lightly ruffled my hair.

She would come soon.

Helena would come.

I knew that day would come eventually. But I was not looking forward to it.

Fourth Movement: The Boy in the Mirror

Fragment 1: Itsuki Kisaragi

Quon's blood was being taken from her body. *Poor thing. But it has to be done. Because Helena is here.*

It's been about ten years. I only knew her as a young girl, and she hadn't changed a bit. She still had that cruel laugh.

She was dispatched for technical support on the Vermillion Series sponsored by the Foundation, but in no time after her arrival, she had put the Vermillion work aside, came to the science department, and requested more tests on Quon. The Foundation didn't seem to care one way or another. With total disregard for the command system of TERRA and the UN, she had the gall to come in and make direct commands to the science department.

Poor Quon. Once again forced to undergo these awful tests.

"Is there a problem?"

"According to our physical examination team's analysis report, Quon has not yet awakened. However, the verified information in the DNA is contradictory...."

Helena shook a small, yellow information storage disk between her fingers at me.

Could it be?!

"You've always been bad at lying." Helena cynically turned up her lips. "Your precious Sleeping Beauty has been awake for some time now. I wonder when her prince kissed her."

The science department's mark was yellow. There was no doubt about it. It was Quon's awakening data. If she got her hands on it that....

"But if that was passed to the UN, then!..." As soon as the words slipped from her mouth, Nanamori made a guilty face and clapped her hand over her mouth. It was too late. I knew she was on our side. So I assumed she would not betray us. I was too trusting.

"P-Please believe me. I was only thinking of you, Doctor...."

"Of me? Surely you were only thinking of yourself." My words cut like a knife. Nanamori was speechless and her lips quivered as she stood there.

"He doesn't want to see you anymore."

The speechless Nanamori ran from the room. She slammed the door with a resounding bang.

"I almost forgot," Helena said, as if nothing had happened, "I don't see Makoto. Did something happen?"

"He seems to find you a bit hard to deal with."

"You look as if you feel the same way."

And I do. I have always found your cruelty hard to deal with. That cruelty which lets you pluck the wings off of a beautiful butterfly without a second thought.

Fragment 2: Sayoko Nanamori

This can't be. It can't be.

How could that data have been passed to the UN? If I had known this was going to happen I would never have let it leave my sight.

Never. Never. Never!

It was the same as before. He said that nothing bad would happen; that this was for his father's and brother's benefit. He said that and then made me betray them. I killed my dad and my brother.

I will never forget the tattoo of the Foundation's crest on his arm.

Why has the Foundation come back into my life? I want nothing to do with them. I especially want nothing to do with this.

Why?!

Why does everything I do backfire?

Fragment 3: Johji Futagami

This rain sucks. It's just a sprinkle, like tears. A woman is crying somewhere. Thinking about herself and crying.

"I still don't really get Quon."

A liaison with Level Three in the rain ... this is some nice date.

"But I heard that management control is going to be transferred to the Bähbem Foundation."

"The Foundation, huh?"

"Yeah. It hasn't been officially decided yet, but unofficially it's going to happen."

The management of Quon is going to the Foundation? What could this mean? I would have to pass this information onto the superiors immediately. The owner will get mad at the dog that doesn't bring home the meat.

"Well, thanks for the information. As thanks, if I can call it that, I'll let you in on something."

Man, sometimes I can't believe myself.

"I'll let you in on something" Hah! That's how I planted the trigger throughout TERRA's organization and wait for someone to pull it.

"It's in regard your uncle, Shougo Rikudoh. Were you aware that he had a daughter?"

"My uncle is single."

"Yes, he is, but he still has a daughter somehow."

Yes, even I think this sounds over-dramatic.

"This daughter of his left when she was seventeen. This all appened before you were born, of course, so it's only natural that you wouldn't know."

"So? Even if he had a daughter, what does that have to do with you?"

Level Three was starting to get annoyed.

OK, take it slowly. It's all part of the act.

"Please hear me out. The daughter went to Tokyo after she left the island. She got married so her last name has changed. It's a very interesting name, you know."

"Get to the point."

"It's Kamina, written with the characters for 'god' and 'name.' It's a nice name, don't you think?"

The name Kamina had the shock power of a 500 kilogram bomb. The color in her face quickly drained, and the uninterested expression quickly left with it. Level Three's searched my face seriously.

Come on now, you're in the information department, too, aren't you? You can't let your emotions show so easily....

"Doctor Rikudoh knows about that. It seems that he wasn't just a retired archaeologist. Why don't you look into it?"

As I had suspected, Level Three did not appear to know about Level Two Beta's past. *What should I do with this information? How should I try to affect Beta? It will be something to see, no doubt.*

I wonder if this damn rain will ever stop. Forget about my shoes, I'm soaked through to my socks. There's something pathetic about hanging socks out to dry at the inn.

Fragment 4: Elvy Hadhiyat

A distinct engine rumble echoed through the cockpit.

The Vermillion was an easy machine to use ... if you could even classify it as simply as a machine, that is. Unlike other combat planes, the Vermillion was what they called a robotic weapon. They said that a new weapon would be supplied by the Foundation, but I certainly wasn't expecting anything like this. At the most, I thought that it would be a fighter with some more power than the Shinsei fighter.

To tell the truth, when I first saw it in front of me I thought they were joking around. It looked like a third-rate knock-off of Rahxephon. I couldn't believe they were asking us to command these. Combat plane operators have a lot of pride, so asking us to fly something that looks like a transport plane is like a slap in the face to us.

This is a robot?

Why did I have to fly something like this?

But a mere five minutes after leaving the ground all those thoughts had flown far from my mind. An intuitive control system was something we had never experienced before, but with a simple simulation lesson anyone could learn how to control it. Even so, when you think of

attacks and high-speed travel, it really was the best choice to have combat plane operators, like us, control them.

"This is the Alpha V1 to Control Center. There is no problem with the operation. All is going smoothly."

"Next, move on to Phase Two in the test manual."

Finally, testing out the main armament, the Baus-Ghazal gun.

Just move the Vermillion at high speed to a point four kilometers from the target. Even if you suddenly hit the breaks the machine responds immediately.

Draw the Baus-Ghazal.

"Shoot continuously on full-auto for five seconds with the rail-gun shift."

High-speed ceramic pellets were fired from the gun with a light shock, and giant columns of water shot up from the surface like walls, one after another for five seconds. With thirty seconds of this on full-auto, one could probably even sink the Lilia Litvyak.

"Next, switch to the plasma canon."

The tip of the strange assault rifle, Baus-Ghazal, opened up into a U-shape. The plasma began to sparkle during this transformation.

Locking on the rock target!

Fire.

A gigantic ray of light shot out and absorbed into the rock like a whip of a tail.

Flash!

A mushroom cloud on the scale of that of the atomic bomb rose up into the sky.

"Wow."

It was so impressive that the word slipped through my lips. *With this much offensive power, we could definitely destroy the Dolem. We will no longer have to hang pathetically between the Dolem's legs, as we once did.*

It is no longer necessary for Ayato Kamina to fight.

Fragment 5: Souichi Yagumo

There was a mushroom cloud on the scale of that of the atomic bomb up on the central monitor. Everyone was surprised by the incredible power, but no one tried to figure out the meaning behind the introduction of the Vermillion. Even so, I couldn't just explain it to them.

"When the nature preservation groups see this image they may faint."

All I could do was mutter cynical comments. I meant to mumble it to myself, but Haruka heard and glared at me.

"Lieutenant-Commander Yagumo," I was called in a polite, yet condescending tone. It was Helena. She was the commoner in charge of the Vermillion Series' technical support, but as a relative of the head of the Foundation, Lord Bābhem, she treated everyone, including Director Watari, as her inferior.

"Ayato Kamina, the instrumentalist, or rather, the *pilot*, of the Rahxephon doesn't appear to be here."

He was told about this so I thought he would come. I wonder if she meant she wanted me to go look for him. I wonder if she'd heard what I said earlier.



Well, no matter. I don't want to spend too much time in a control tower taken over by a commoner.

I looked around, but I could not find Ayato anywhere. I wondered where he could be. I had Kim page him, but his cell phone must have been turned off or something because he couldn't be reached. He did that sometimes. Maybe he wasn't used to the cell phone yet.

I went down to the runway and the Vermillion, just back from its test fly, was already back in the hangar. Lieutenant Elvy was surrounded by Squadron Alpha, who were all yelling excitedly.

"The first mass-produced Vermillion will be for me, Cathy MacMahon!"

"I don't think so!"

Lieutenant Elvy and Cathy were joking around. They sure were a carefree group.

"Have you seen Ayato?"

"Nope. But did you see the test fly? The Vermillion is amazing! This machine could even break through Tokyo Jupiter's absolute barrier."

Yes. The machine already had the TDD unit installed as standard equipment. And it was obvious for what purpose it was there.

"If we had about a hundred of these, we could invade Tokyo Jupiter."

Just how carefree are they? Maybe I should tell them more. Give them correct information.

"I wonder what they plan to do with something like this....," I muttered to myself, but just loud enough for them all to hear it. Elvy immediately responded.

"Major, may I speak with you?"

Of course, that's what I'd intended. Otherwise, I wouldn't have said that.

She took me to the shaded area of a building near the runway. It's just like in high school, when students call each other to talk behind the gym after school.

"What is the meaning of this?!"

"I didn't mean anything. Just that TERRA doesn't need a thing like that."

"What?"

I was just trying to give her information, but I seemed to have only upset her. *Damn.*

"Isn't it obvious? TERRA is not an army."

"Don't try to mislead me. Are you trying to tell me that I'm not a soldier? Well, Major?"

I saw no point in her getting testy. It was very unlike me, but I started to get angry.

"TERRA is a strictly defensive operative. But the Vermillion is obviously an invasion weapon."

"So, are you telling me that Operation Overload wasn't an invasion?"

"That operation was lead by the UN."

"But it was *you* who planned the operation!"

She'd picked up on a hard point.

"I was opposed to the plan."

"Opposed to it? You just looked the other way. You looked the other way while my friends died! Do you know what they call people like

you?"

"What?"

"Hypocrites!"

I'm a man. I can't just stand smiling and take this kind of talk.

"Do you know what they call a killing machine? An ace pilot!"

Tit for tat. Fully aware of what the outcome would be, I threw those words back at her. She pulled me up by the collar. Her eyes were burning with anger.

"I am not a killer!"

"How many people do you think have died by the missiles that *you* launch?"

"People? They're Mulians."

"What's the difference between people and Mulians?"

We kept on escalating the battle. We just pushed each other further and brought forth more anger. We both knew it, but we couldn't stop.

"Of course they're different!"

"So are you and Ayato different, too?"

Ahh. How could I let something like that slip out? It was really unlike me. I seemed to be taking out the stress of Helena's presence on Elvy.

"What did you say?"

Judging from the confused expression on her face, Elvy didn't really understand what I meant by those words. Within a few seconds, though, she seemed to grasp the implication and grabbed my collar tighter.

"Hey! Did you get the MU Phase response from Kamina? Are you saying Ayato is a Mulian?" She grabbed my shoulders and shook me.

"Answer me!"

"Please just ... just forget what I said."

Elvy was now wondering about Ayato. It was even written in the reports about her that she lost her brother in the MU War. I was such an idiot to not have even realized. And now I said something unnecessary.

She was already full of self-hatred, and I had gone and made it worse.

Clang!

Elvy and I looked around the corner of the building when we heard the sound. And standing there...

...was Ayato.

How long had he been there? Could he have heard us talking about the MU Phase Response? Judging from his face ... he had.

With an expressionless look that seemed like it was pasted on his face, he said, "Excuse me," and ran off.

This is horrible. He heard.

I really messed up today. I'm sure my horoscope for today was awful. But I don't have time for self-loathing. I've got to go after him.

1

Kamina released the MU Phase Response.

Kamina released the MU Phase Response.

Kamina released the MU Phase Response.

I don't even know exactly what the MU Phase Response is, but I know what it means.

It means that I am a Mulian.

Up until now, I had thought of the Mulian as the enemy. No, I was forcing myself to believe it. Otherwise I wouldn't have been able to fight with those who came from my own home. Otherwise I wouldn't be able to make it in TERRA, organized as the Mulian's enemy.

But.... But....

I ran.

I tripped and fell. It hurt me, just like it would a human.

Blood dripped from the scratches on my palms. It was red, just like that of a human.

Am I a Mulian even though my blood is red? Aren't the Mulians the blue-blooded people that I saw in Tokyo?

"Ayato, wait!"

At the sound of Yagumo's voice, I got up and started running again. I kept running. My heart pounded and careened against my ribcage. I ran until I got a stitch in my side.

Just like a human.

But I am a Mulian. Even so, I am a Mulian. I'm a Mulian after all. I killed Kim's parents, I took Megumi's father from her, I painted the ground red with the blood of others. I am the ringleader behind it all.

See, look over there. It's a Mulian. The enemy of all mankind. It's one of those who took the lives of two billion people in the MU War.

No. NO. NO!

I'm a human.

No, you're a Mulian. You're different from humans. Someday your blood will turn blue. Just like your mother's.

No. No. No....

Tired from running, I sat down on a bench in the park. There was a puddle by my feet from yesterday's rain and my dark face was reflected in it.

Mulian eyes were looking back at me.

No. I'm a human.

No. You're a Mulian.

"I finally found you."

Yagumo walked up and sat down beside me. A human sat down beside me. A human and a Mulian were sitting next to each other on a bench.

A heavy silence hung in the air between us.

"Yagumo...."

"It's just the two of us, you can call me Sou."

I think he meant it as a joke, trying his hardest to lighten the mood. But I couldn't laugh.

"Ha ha. Just kidding."

Yagumo's mouth closed tightly.

"Was what you said earlier true?"

Yagumo didn't answer immediately. Again the silence hung thick over us.

"What ... am I?"

"You are you."

I closed my hands into fists. Putting it nicely was too easy. *I am me. I am me. I am me. I am me. I am me.* No matter how he put it, "You are you," just didn't do it for me.

"So I was the only one who didn't know."

He sighed quietly in response.

"Only a few people know."

Do you think that makes me feel any better?

"Really.... They laugh behind my back, I bet. Calling me a Mulian. Saying I'm not human. You were just using me, right? Just because I can operate the Rahzephon."

The silence returned and hung uncomfortably between us.

"It's pathetic, isn't it?" Yagumo muttered the words under his breath. "I don't mean you. I was talking about myself. I'm pathetic. I don't even have the guts to hit you."

I was not a hot-blooded kid or anything, so hitting me wasn't going to do much good. I wouldn't know what to do. What did he want me to do, cry and grab onto him saying, "I was wrong, Yagumo?!"

"I don't mind. You can hit me. I am a Mulian, after all."

"That doesn't matter. Because *you* are *you*, right?"

Not that crap again!

I stood up. *You are you*, my ass. My heart was already breaking, those words of encouragement did nothing.

"I don't want your pretty words!"

The silence seemed to be laughing at me.

"People are connected to each other." Yagumo looked down at his hands and seemed to be talking to convince himself, as much as me. "I am able to be here for that reason, too. So you can be here, too. As yourself."

Just then, Yagumo's cell phone rang.

"It's a D1 alarm."

"It's OK. I'll go."

I didn't care anymore.

"I'll fight for you. I'll destroy the enemy for you."

"You don't have to go."

Huh?

"Do you really think you can fight now? It's just not that easy, is it?"

What? I can't believe this. He's just going to let people down and refuse my offer like that? Has he no ambition?

Yagumo turned away from me without a word and headed towards the headquarters building.

I am alone ... left behind in an empty park.

I could still make it. If I ran, I could catch up with Yagumo. But my legs wouldn't move. I couldn't move a single step.

All I could do was collapse onto the bench.

I sighed and looked down at my feet. There was a Mulian there. Me, reflected in the puddle.

Fragment 6: Elvy Hadhiyat

I can do it. I can do it with the Vermillion.

"The D1 has altered its course. Estimated time of contact is 18:00. We have only five minutes."

The adrenaline was flowing through my body. In mere moments I could have my first victory. My first victory since Operation Overload. I grabbed the controls and increased the speed of the Vermillion.

You're a Mulian.

That's what my reflection in the puddle said to me.

"No. It's some kind of mistake."

Then who is your mother? She's not the woman with the blue blood?

"My mom is my mom."

You think you've got it all under control. That's how you pretend to be a human and fight your own kind. Even though you're a Mulian. You traitor.

"No. I'm not a traitor."

I stepped on the eyes of the Mulian staring back at me from the puddle. The water splashed up and my face distorted. After a little while the water settled and the warped eyes stared back at me once again. I stepped on them again. And they stared back once more. I stepped on them again....

"What should I do?"

You should go home. Your home in Tokyo. To where your fellow Mulians are.

"I can't do that. Aren't you forgetting about the absolute barrier?"

You're going to stay here? In the humans' land? Where Mulians should not be?

"Haruka is here. Megumi, Itsuki, Quon, and Kim are all here."

Asahina is in Tokyo. So is Mamoru. And your mother. Why do you fight the Dolem that come from Tokyo? Are the Dolem your enemy?

I remembered when I decided to fight the Dolem. I decided to

fight so that everyone would accept me. Yes. I was trying to get everyone to accept me.

I also remembered seeing Tokyo Jupiter beyond the Dolem I had destroyed. I went back to Niraikanai. I went back to Niraikanai because everyone was there.

Yes ... I went back of my own will. It was my decision. No one told me to do it. I just picked the place where I should be.

I slowly stood up from the bench.

"I have to go. Because I *am* here."

Raison d'être. It was a word that I heard during Social Studies when I was practically falling asleep. For some reason it came back to me now. Yes. Fighting Dolem with Rahxephon. *That is why I'm here; it's my reason for being.*

I glanced down at the puddle. And I saw Ayato Kamina's reflection.

Fragment 7: Itsuki Kisaragi

Makoto poured some '25 Krug Clos de Mesnil into a well-polished glass, careful not to make a froth, creating only slight waves on the surface. He silently took a sip.

I silently drank my sake. I didn't care about the label. I wasn't drinking this sake for the taste, I was drinking this sake to get drunk.

"So, did you see her?"

Why ask when you already know? The only reason you invited me to your home is because I met her.

"She seemed eager to see you."

"I guess we'll have to meet sometime in the near future. The three of us," he said bitterly.

Isn't it your fault that the three of us have to meet? If you hadn't handed Quon's data over to Helena, we might not have had to meet her.

"Well, you sowed the seeds."

"Sowed?"

Makoto chuckled and looked toward me. Then he looked over my shoulder at Quon on the veranda.

"I may have picked a few flowers."

My flower was blooming under the setting sun. She was quietly drinking tea on the veranda. *You are the one who picked her and made her yours, Makoto Isshiki.*

"You know why, don't you?"

"I don't know. And I don't want to know."

You've realized, haven't you? That I've never told you my true feelings to the extent that I am now.

"Aren't you being cold! At least champagne is better the colder it is...."

Makoto took another drink as he spoke. The sound of his glass hitting the table echoed throughout the room.

"You should try to get used to being alone. Have some independence."

For a second, a murderous impulse rushed through me. But I realized that killing him wouldn't make Quon mine. If it would, I certainly would not have hesitated to do it. The clock chimed six-thirty.

Fragment 8: Elvy Hadhiyat

I managed to lure the blue and red ray-shaped Dolem into the war path. Here I could use whatever moves I wanted.

I fired the Baus-Ghazal repeatedly.

The enemy moved quicker than I had predicted and my bullets tore open the ground. Columns of water shot up from the small pools in bomb craters across the land. Ruined buildings fell completely to the ground. But the Dolem didn't take a single shot.

At least now I knew my opponent's speed.

It's OK. I'll get it with the next one.

I aimed the Baus-Ghazal and switched to the plasma canon. Just as I locked on the target, a shadow jumped in front of me.

It was the Rahxephon.

It was Ayato Kamina, suddenly there with the Rahxephon. Even though he was supposed to have been denied sortie.

"You're in the way, Kamina!"

"I can do it!"

Just then, the Dolem's blue and red parts split apart; what I had thought was one body was, in fact, two.

The blue Dolem came at the Vermillion, and the red one at the Rahxephon. The second I tried to engage in battle, I crashed into the Rahxephon. The shock ran right through to the cockpit.

"I told you, you're in the way!"

"So are you, Elvy!"

What right has he?! Talking like he's the leader! I have the Vermillion. You're not supposed to be in this show.

The D1 Aria echoed throughout the area.

As the sun began to set, the red Dolem and the blue Dolem split off to flank us, opening what appeared to be large wings.

As they did so, the space around us solidified and the Vermillion was closed in.

This is ... a mirror. It was like I was stuck in a fun house from the old days. There were several Vermillions reflected all around me.

Above, below, in front, and next to me. Countless Vermillions were vaguely floating in space.

"What the--"

I aimed the Baus-Ghazal and pulled the railgun trigger. The ceramic pellets were absorbed into the reflected images soundlessly, as if shot into a jelly-like substance.

3

I took several shots in the back and involuntarily threw my head back.

I turned around to see a reflection of the Rahxephon and ran out, ignoring the lack of a sortie command, and finally caught up with Elvy, who had been attacked by the Dolem, and who was now stuck in this mirror hell.

I was hit again. I was pummeled with bullets that came out of the reflection of the Rahxephon.

I extended the sword of light on reflex and pulled it down toward the reflection.

There was no response; the sword of light was absorbed into the

mirror space as if cutting through air.

"What are you doing, Kamina?"

Huh? Elvy?

As if in response, I felt several more shots in the back. I get it.

The Vermillion is on the other side of the mirror.

"Elvy, we're attacking each other."

"Shut up!" She yelled back angrily. "Why did you come? I can do it by myself without you!"

What? Is that the thanks I get for coming out to help her?

"Because I'm a Mulian? Is that why?"

"I ... I'm not strong enough to trust you!"

What.... She doesn't trust me? Then why am I on the battlefield?

Why am I fighting?

Fragment 9: Makoto Isshiki

The lights were turned on as the darkness crept up beyond the glass, and Quon could again be seen on the terrace. But that wasn't enough to combat night, and the area beyond the terrace was engulfed in darkness. I could see Itsuki's cold face reflected on the glass.

"You're trying to open up a new world using Quon as the key."

Exactly. You know exactly what I'm doing. I'm not surprised. I can open a new world if I have Quon under my control. A world for us.

"But that's not your world. Because you are a D."

"Shut up!"

I threw my champagne in Itsuki's face, without even thinking. Itsuki, now dripping, glared at me.

So what. You hurt me with the words you know I least want to hear.

I won't forgive you!

The momentary rush of anger affected my actions.

4

"Oh, no."

A girl appeared in the cockpit. I could only see her from the back, but it was Mishima. There was no doubt.

But you're....

"Mi ... shi ... ma...."

"Don't look over here."

Without turning to me, Mishima stared at the reflection of the Rahxephon.

"Huh?"

"If you look over here, Ollin will never reach Yolteotl."

Mishima reached her left arm out in front of her.

I could see the Rahxephon's left arm on the screen. There was an arrow-like bar of light coming forth from it.

It can't be. This must be a dream. Because ... because....

"You died!"

"It just looked like I did."

She brought her right arm up to her left shoulder and pulled back as if drawing the bow.

Suddenly the Rahxephon aimed the arrow of light and pulled back. The Rahxephon's reflection was standing before the arrow.

"This is a dream."

"It just seems that way."

"Who are you?!"

"I'm Ixtli. And I'm Reika Mishima. I'm..."

As she spoke she slowly turned toward me.

"...you."

She stopped speaking and her right arm moved.

The arrow was fired!

"Stop!"

Fragment 10: Elvy Hadhiyat

An arrow of light came flying through the mirror as if it were cutting through air.

If I had been even a second slower it would surely have sliced through the Vermillion's arm.

It was Kamina. Kamina did it.

"You ... you attacked me!"

"N-no. It wasn't me."

What ... what?! Who else could have done it?

Anger ran coursed me and I ran toward the reflection, thrusting both my arms at it.

Gah!

There was something there. I pulled it toward me. The Rahxephon showed itself through the reflection of the Vermillion.

I knew it was you!

I stared into the Rahxephon's eyes. The Vermillion was reflected

in them. My anger was reflected in them.

Fragment 11: Quon Kisaragi

At the distant place where the sun was setting, two tuning forks resounding together. The forks tuned the grudges of man. They made an ominous echo, changing the form of the world. The glass on the table fell in time with my rising, tea spilled across the floor of the terrace.

"Ollin ... that is a filthy mirror. Only warped sounds will echo to you."

Alas, my voice will not reach him. It will not resound in Ollin's heart. All that resounds in Ollin's heart is his own form.

5

A warped image of the Rahxephon reflected on the Vermillion's head sensor.

Damn. She's got me.

I'm going to be killed. I'm going to be killed. I'm going to be killed.

If I'm going to be killed, then I'll kill you first!

I'll kill you!

Fragment 12: Elvy Hadhiyat

I'll kill you!

I could hear the sound of dew dropping from somewhere.

The sound spread.

It spread.

To the world.

It spread the warped sounds of the mirror.

It can't be stopped.

It won't stop.

The world is turning to hatred.

No. No.

The world can't be turned to hatred.

You can't do that!

I desperately stretched out a hand. I couldn't stop the sound, but I could change it.

Fragment 13: Megumi Shitow

Something happened. The monitor was showing an immeasurable energy level. It was spreading at high speed from the Rahxephon and the Vermillion. I let out a shriek and that energy reached Niraikanai almost simultaneously. At that moment everything and everybody in the operation room stopped moving.

And then....

Time....

Fragment 14: Itsuki Kisaragi

"Aren't you being cold! At least champagne is better the colder it is...."

Makoto took a drink of his cold champagne as he spoke. The sound of his glass hitting the table echoed throughout the room.

Just then, the scenery trembled.

No, the bottom of my heart trembled.

What was it? I turned toward Makoto without thinking.

"Did you just feel something strange?"

"Perhaps the sake is starting to affect you?" A mocking smile crept across Makoto's face.

"You should try getting used to being alone. Have some independence. All I did was speed things up for you. This time would have come eventually. Our time would have come."

His conceited words were enough to make me feel murderous. But I didn't think anything of it.

Something had just happened. I had no idea what. But I could say with confidence that Ayato was somehow involved.

Because something hot had run from my heart to my stomach. What a loathsome feeling.

The clock chimed six-thirty.

Fragment 15: Elvy Hadhiyat

Lock on!

Plasma particles sparkled in the Baus-Ghazal's open barrel, clumped together, and were shot out toward the ray-like Dolem.

A rapid stream of plasma tore into the Dolem and even its shrieking seemed to melt, just like the rest of its body. .

When it was all over, there was nothing left in its place.

"I did it! I did it!"

I was so filled with joy that only a hoarse whisper escaped my lips.

I finally did it. I managed to destroy a Dolem without any help from the Rahxephon.

"I can fight without the Rahxephon."

As I said that, I noticed the Rahxephon on the corner of the monitor. When did he?... I wonder if he heard what I just said.

7

"I ... I'm no longer necessary."

A strangely intense wave of sadness spread in a ripples from the control seat to the surrounding water.

I'm not necessary. No one needs me....

Fragment 16: Helena Bähbem

It's so noisy! The operation center was filled with the sound of praise for the Vermillion, but that didn't matter to me. I was staring at the analysis machine I was given by my uncle and shaking with quiet excitement.

Someone called my name over and over.

"Miss Helena, do you have the Vermillion's data together?"

"Huh? Oh, if it can fight for thirty-eight minutes and seven seconds, that should be more than enough, right?"

Leave me alone. I'm contemplating the meaning of this number.

"What? I think it was just twenty minutes."

Shitow looked surprised. The actual time was twenty-one minutes and thirty-six seconds. There was a sixteen minute and thirty-one-second difference from that and the time shown by the analysis machine. If Uncle hadn't told me that this sort of phenomenon could happen, I would have thought there was something wrong with the machine.

But it had really happened.

With that, even if one was out of our control, we could still carry out the tuning process using the Vermillion.

Fragment 17: Quon Kisaragi

The sun should have set already, but it was setting again. Taira no Kiyomori said that he looked up at the setting sun and made it rise once more. *Has the legend become reality?* Ollin had looked into the Magic Mirror of the God of Obsidian, Tezcatlipoca. The hatred became sorrow and piled up on the ground. And I pick up the shards of the cup that fell. With the sun beating down on me. With Ollin's sorrow beating down on me.

Fifth Movement: Another Man's Island

Fragment 1: Itsuki Kisaragi

"The management of the first M-model sample was officially transferred to the Bähbem Foundation as of today. Isn't that great, Helena?" Helena asked.

"Check the Vermillion System's resonance with that of the Rahxephon. Now Uncle's project has advanced one more step."

"As long as we can rely on that system."

"At least more than we can on you. Right, Itsuki?"

"Why don't you say something?"

I didn't think I had anything to do this, but apparently they wanted a statement from me.

"What should we do about Ayato Kamina?"

"If we can't train him to work as a pair with it, then just send him off to a boarding facility. He's just a fake. We've got the original. Right?" Makoto said, looking toward the center of the room. There stood Quon. Quon, now called the first M-model sample.

"I'm going."

"That's right. You're going back. To your real home."

And where is her real home?

1

Morning. Morning that I don't want to come. Morning that comes to a place that no longer needs me. I hate this. I hate it.

"It's morning!"

The door slid open and the ever-insensitive Megumi came in.
How can she just barge into my room like this?

"Hey, it's already seven."

She started to shake me awake.

"Get up, Ayato. Are you listening? You know, depending on my examination scores today, I might be able to become an official staff member starting tomorrow."

She kept shaking my body as she went on and on about herself. Didn't she see that I wanted to be left alone?

"Hey, Ayato, get up. Come on, get up!"

She pulled back my thin cover. Our eyes met, and she smiled. She knew. She knew from the start, and made fun of me for being a Mulian, and thought that even she, a dropout, was better off than me.

"You know, don't you?"

"A-about what?"

Don't act innocent. I pulled back my thin cover and rolled back over.

"What?! Fine, just sleep, then!"

The sound of the now-angry Megumi slamming the door shut reverberated through the room.

"They know. The all know...."

The whispered words fell onto my pillow.

Everyone knows. And they laughed, used me, and tricked me. Whatever. They can laugh as much as they want. They can use me as much as they want. But ... just don't tell me you don't need me....

Fragment 2: Megumi Shitow

The Rahxephon was moving further away on the radar screen.

"Rahxephon, please respond. Ayato! Ayato!"

There was no response. I looked to Gomi for a decision.

"It's no good! There is no response. Twelve minutes have passed since the Rahxephon has left our control. Switching to Emergency Manual B-3!"

"Understood."

Yagumo nodded and forwarded his project ID. I entered the numbers and called up B-3.

"B-3 Manual. Protect released."

The B-3 Manual came up on the display immediately. I quickly read it.

But this says....

It's awful. It wants me to just leave that idiot there to die?

But I have to follow orders.

"This is an emergency notice from the TERRA Command Headquarters to the Fourth Direction Army Operation. Currently, the N-class Type 2 out-of-place artifact that was under our management has failed to obey our halt order. It is in the north upper center of the Kyushu direction! It has taken an interception position."

As I was making the notice, the Rahxephon continued to rapid-

ly approach Kyushu.

I had to hurry.

"In order to carry out the two-sided attack with TERRA, command will be assumed entirely by the TERRA Command Headquarters, in accordance with UN Agreement 132, Article F, Section 6."

Three minutes later, one of the lights on the monitor disappeared.

It was the Rahxephon.

It was all over.

I can't do this anymore.... I'm so tired....

"Cheer up."

I was buying coffee from the vending machine when Kim spoke to me.

"Can you believe what they did?"

"That was a really cruel simulation test, that's for sure. But I think you did well, Meg."

Kim was always so kind. The results weren't out yet, but I had done it exactly according to the manual.

"And there's this...."

I pulled at the embarrassing armband with TRAINEE written on it to show her.

"Hopefully I can say good-bye to this."

"We'll definitely be having your promotion party tomorrow."

Kim gave me her guarantee. But I don't really want a party....

"About that...."

I lowered my voice.

"I'm sorry. I might not be able to go to a party."

"But you're the guest of honor! You have to come!"

Yeah, but this is something I decided a long time ago.

"I already made up my mind, you know. If I get the promotion, I'm going to tell him my real feelings."

I said it.

I said it.

There's no going back now.

Just one more embarrassment.

Whether tomorrow goes well or not, I'm going to be teased by Kim.

But if my promotion test went well, my love will go well, too. The goddess of happiness will smile upon me.

2

I've got to say it. I've got to say it. I've got to tell Itsuki. That bastard was mocking me. He wasn't researching the Rahxephon.

I went to his office and he was sitting there quietly smiling, as usual.

"So, you finally came. Put on your FH suit. Today we're going to do an experiment recreating that arrow of light."

"Shut up!"

Of course he looked surprised by my sudden angry outburst.

"You only think of me as something to research, too, don't you, Itsuki? Just a Mulian who can pilot the Rahxephon!"

"So?"

I wasn't expecting him to come back with a question. I hesitated for a minute.

"So what? What's so strange about a MU Phase Response being released by someone from Tokyo? You're from Tokyo, right?"

Well, yeah....

"But that was kept secret and I was forced to fight. With my own people."

"You are from Tokyo, but are you a Mulian?"

What? What is he trying to say?

"I'm sorry, I'm being confusing, aren't I? I want to know what you think of yourself as. Are you a human? Or are you a Mulian?"

"That's the answer I'm looking for...."

"Well, this is the perfect opportunity to find it. Come on, have a seat."

I was letting Itsuki take control of the situation, but I sat down as I was told.

"Nanamori isn't here, so if you want coffee you'll have to get it yourself."

"What happened?"

"Nothing to worry about. Anyway, about you. You thought of yourself as a human. But now you hear that you're a Mulian and you're surprised. That's it, right?"

I just nodded. That was pretty much exactly it.

"So, just how much of you is the human you thought you were?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. Just how much of you is the human you thought you were?"

He just repeated his question. *How much of me is the human I thought I was?*

"You have memories of yourself, of course. But how many of those memories are correct?"

Huh? What does he mean?

"Let me give you a little example. Do you know what kind of car Nanamori drives?"

"Yeah, it's a Ferrari F40."

Itsuki smiled quietly.

"Nope. It's a Ferrari 456GT."

Really? No. It's definitely an F40. I desperately searched my memories, but that was all that was there. A V12 with a 2 plus 2; that's an F40.

Itsuki silently handed me a copy of an article. There was a picture of an F40, but it was completely different from what I remembered. "A two seater. V8 DOHC 4 valve, 2936cc, twin turbo...." There was a lot in the article, like the top speed and several other details, but I didn't notice any of it. I turned to the second copy; it was about the Ferrari 456GT. And there was a picture of the F40 as I knew it.

So what was what I believed to be an F40?

"Everyone misremembers things sometimes."

"This isn't just misremembering. It's like a bug, from when they were made."

"When what was made?"

"Your memories were specially created."

Your memories were especially created.

Your memories were especially created.

Those words echoed throughout my empty heart.

Created...?

My memories?

"So who is the me I think I am?"

For the first time ever, it felt like the ground was crumbling beneath me. So that really happens.

I felt like I was going to be sick.

This was no longer just about the MU Phase Response. This was the feeling that I was no longer me. It couldn't be worse. I felt like I was going to cry.

My mother playing with me. The feeling of the corner of the intellectual education. The feeling of lying on the hot concrete by the pool, water trickling over the concrete, a dusty smell. The joy of cracking the ice on the ground in the morning. The feeling of the waves in the ocean. The sandbox where I had a fight. The first girl I ever liked. A quiet song. A singer I liked. The metallic taste of the water in the water fountain at school.... Were all of those things lies?

Was everything about me a lie?

Everything about me was a lie.

My body shook with an almost laughable terror, and I held myself tightly.

I held myself so tightly that I could barely breathe, but the cold feeling in the pit of my stomach would not go away.

I was sweating, but felt cold.

My hands were clammy, but cold.

The life I have lived is a lie.

Fragment 3: Itsuki Kisaragi

I'm such a coward.

I spite an innocent man for picking flowers. Well, he's not completely innocent.

"Are you all right?"

I tried to rub his back, but hesitated. How can I try to be kind with this hand that still bears the burden of causing injury? A voice in my mind accused me.

Is this the only way you can redeem yourself for letting Quon be taken away? Pathetic.

Is hurting Helena's tools your way of rebelling against her? How childish.

Shouldn't you understand the pain of being hurt?

I suppressed the voices. Because he was the source of all of them. I had to get him to carry all of the sins and the joys.

"I know this may not sound like much, but it's not like they were all created. It's more like necessary things were added to the base of your already-existing memories, and the unnecessary things were taken away. You can't make a person's memories from nothing and expect them to be able to function as a human being."

But there was no reaction from the hunched back.

"One more thing ... and don't forget this. All of your memories since you left Tokyo are your own. They are real and they are yours. That, at least, is certain."

There was still no reaction from Ayato's hunched back.

But it would be OK.

It may be hard, but it was fact and he had to know it. And this

would help her. This is all I, who knows where she is, can do for her.

Fragment 4: Haruka Shitow

I could see a thunder cloud appear on the horizon past the laundry hanging to dry in the yard.

My uncle was drinking tea on the porch and I was sitting next to him. From the outside it probably looked like the most peaceful scene possible. But I had to ask him something.

"I know," I said, showing my uncle several photographs, "that you really did your work. I thought the Foundation confiscated everything from those involved."

He spoke as if this had nothing to do with us, but it must have hit him hard.

They were all pictures of Maya Rikudoh. I really did work to get these, as Uncle said. No one had pictures of her; not people from the school, not even her friends. But she had stood out, anyone from school would know her, so I figured I had a chance. I found the pictures in an old file at the photo store. As I knew her, she was a cold, beautiful woman who gave off an untouchable aura that kept people away.

But in the picture she was laughing and just looked like a beautiful woman you would see around town. In fact, all of her friends confirmed that she was cheerful, beautiful, and the most popular girl in their class. And one day she disappeared. Several days later, a bunch of men in black appeared, collected all the pictures of her, and told them to keep quiet.

It was the year Maya Rikudoh turned seventeen.

"What happened?"

"Maybe it'll rain and give us a break from this heat."

"Uncle, please don't try to change the subject."

He looked at me with an expression that seemed to say, "What a troublesome girl you are."

Then, he finally began to talk.

"It's like I was the bamboo-cutting old man, right out of the fairy tale. I tried to raise her like a normal girl, but one day they came for her. No, she went back on her own. To where she should be. Sometimes I think about it. I wonder what Princess Kaguya thought when she found out that she was a person from the moon."

Uncle looked at me with eyes that seemed both sad and beseeching.

I knew what he was urging me to do. But I couldn't.

"Why don't you tell him? Tell Ayato. He already...."

I shook my head and interrupted him.

"I'm scared.... I'm afraid of Ayato knowing the truth."

He probably wouldn't forgive me if he found out the truth. My heart aches just thinking about it.

"I see. Well ... just don't do anything you'll regret," Uncle said to me kindly.

But....

Can one really have a life without regrets?

Fragment 5: Megumi Shitow

Hmmm.

I can't choose.

I don't know.

I can never make up my mind at the lingerie store.

They're all so pretty.

There're all so attractive.

I jumped onto the Town Linger.

I didn't just get on. I jumped on. In my hand was a shopping bag. A bag full of beautiful lingerie. Who wouldn't jump?

I was really surprised at how attentive the sales clerk at the lingerie store was. I tried stuff on in the fitting room and all of a sudden she asked, "How is everything?" It was totally different from shopping at the underwear section of a department store.

And, man, it pushes them up like this, like that, in here, up there. It was like they were clay; my chest looked better than it ever had before.

More than the lingerie, I was impressed with the technology.

So this is why my sister always likes to buy her underwear at these kinds of shops.

But I couldn't believe when she asked if it was underwear for a "special occasion."

I hate calling it "special-occasion" underwear. It's so inelegant.

The sales lady probably thought she was just making conversation, but I'm only fourteen. Of course it's not for a "special occasion."

I just wanted to feel like a new, beautiful me from top to bottom. Wearing pretty lingerie makes you feel pretty.

But I did get them, so I can confess my true feelings tomorrow. So I guess it is sort of a special occasion.

Every time I peaked into the shopping bag, an uncontrollable grin spread across my lips.

Tomorrow I'm going to wear this and tell Yagumo how I feel about him.

"I have always, always liked you."

That's what I'll say.

"OK!"

I made a fist in determination.

Just then I heard a familiar voice.

"What should we do for dinner?"

Huh? It was Kim's voice.

"Kim?"

I gulped and turned around.

I gulped at the cruelty of how happy she looked.

Kim and Yagumo were sitting together in the boxseat kitty-corner from me.

I panicked and hunched down, hiding behind my seat back.

I grabbed onto my shopping bag like a drowning person grabbing a life raft.

No way.

That can't be.

I didn't see it.

I didn't see it.

I didn't see it.

If I say it a hundred times, then it didn't happen.

But reality is painful.

I could hear their happy voices.

"Should I make something? What do you want?"

"Hmm. Whatever you make is fine by me."

"Humph, you men! Can't you make a decision?"

"There are tons of other decisions that I have to make. Like Meg's promotion."

Stop. Don't say my name to Kim in that happy voice.

Crinkle!

My shopping bag made a noise.

"Anything you make is delicious."

Crinkle!

"Don't try to flatter me!"

Crinkle!

"Oh, before I forget, tomorrow I have to go in early. What do you want to do?"

"Just the same as always. I have a key."

Crinkle.

Crinkle.

Crinkle, crinkle.

The shopping bag was crushed to my chest.

My heart was being crushed.

Totally unaware of my presence, the two of them kept chattering on like a happy couple.

Faster!

Get to my station!

I don't want to be here for even one more second.

The second we arrived at the station, I jumped from the car. leaving my crushed shopping bag in the seat.

If only I could leave my crushed feelings behind....

Fragment 6: Makoto Isshiki

What a stupid woman. All she knows is how to get drunk and hang all over people.

"I know. I know, OK? I know that you work for Bähbem. That you just used me."

OK, but what good did realizing now do her? She would have still thought I worked for the UN if I hadn't handed that data over to Helena.

"Hmm. You look like you think we're in the same boat."

And I guess that was true.

"Yeah. The same boat. It was only for a little while, but you let me live in a dream."

Just be thankful you got that dream.

"Here...."

Sayoko stood up and set a paper bag on the counter.

"It's just a little something to show my thanks. I don't need it anymore ... because I don't have anyone to wear it for anymore." She looked at me reproachfully. "Thanks to you."

If anyone, I'm the one who should be reproachful! You dug your own grave.

The sound of her high heels clicking on tiles resounded through the small bar as she walked out.

What a stupid woman.

Well, let's take a look at this last present.

I pulled out the red fabric and realized it was a dress cut to shreds. I guess she thought giving me a present like this would somehow affect me.

Pathetic.

She really is a stupid woman.

If she had stayed with me she probably could have had more good memories.

3

I crouched down in my room. I hugged my knees and leaned my bag against the column by the door.

The fake human was crouching.

I noticed something and turned around. Megumi was there with her back to me.

She was silent, but seemed as if she wanted to say something. Her small back. Her weak back.

She stood there and slowly sunk down, as if she'd lost all her strength.

We both crouched down with the column between us.

"I didn't want to know. It's better not to know the truth. Did you know? You probably knew," I finally said, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

I know you knew. That I'm not a real human.

"Everyone knew, didn't they? They knew the truth," I said, accusation ripe in my voice.

"I pretended I didn't see it. I pretended I didn't see, and didn't let

myself know. It was probably easier that way," I said.

What the hell am I saying? I'm telling just Megumi something I can't tell anyone.

"I was afraid. Afraid of knowing. That knowing would destroy me. Because I liked it here...."

It was scary to say I liked it in the past tense. Did that mean I didn't like it anymore? Did I not care anymore? Because I know that I am now being destroyed?

"I see. You're different from the others. You're nice, Ayato."

I'm not nice. Only those who can afford to consider other people can be nice. I can't afford to do that anymore.

Megumi hunched over and drew her knees to her chest and sighed. I could feel the column bend against my back.

Then Megumi slowly stood up.

"I'm sorry, Ayato. I don't know why you're depressed, but ... we might be more similar than I thought, you know."

And then she walked away.

I was left alone again.

Similar? Who? Megumi and I? How?

She has a real life and I don't. What's so similar about that?

Fragment 7: Haruka Shitow

I was sitting on the porch of the main building drinking Awamori sake. It was a bottled sake that had been aged for a long period of time until it took on a smooth flavor and changed to a light amber color.

I sighed.

Time. Time. My time. His time. Time that changed from being closed off.

I sighed again.

I heard feet padding down the hall and Megumi came in. She seemed depressed. I wonder if something happened. She sat down next to me with a thump.

"Man, I wish I were an adult. I'm sure I'd calm down with a drink."

"Adults just tell themselves that drink calms them down."

Megumi sighed deeply and flopped onto her back.

"Adults are all liars."

"Yeah. But you know, lies are harder on the liar than the person being lied to."

That was a lie, too. There aren't many lies that make things hard for the liar. But they do exist. If they didn't, then I was feeling this pain for nothing.

Fragment 8: Souichi Yagumo

It was the day of Meg's promotion.

"Miss Megumi Shitow. I hire you as an official class-three TERRA employee. May 5th, 2029. Shirow Watari, TERRA Director."

I even felt proud just reading the appointment document aloud. She really worked hard for this. Even in situations where we may have given up, she kept plugging along.

"I gratefully accept the position."

Meg seemed different from usual. She must be nervous. I

removed the TRAINEE armband wrapped around her arm. There was really no meaning behind having the band or not, but it was a ritual.

"Good for you, Meg. Here's your ID."

It was a shiny new ID card, but Meg didn't seem very happy as she took it from me.

"Hmm? Aren't you happy? Are you nervous?"

"Huh? Yes, a little...."

Meg, having taken the ID card, bowed her head slightly to me and left.

Strange. That's not like her. I wonder what happened.

Fragment 9: Hotal Kim

Weird.

Meg wasn't being herself. She didn't look at Sou even once while he was reading the appointment document. The only time she really had was when he asked if she was nervous and she looked up briefly.

Her face was....

She should have been bursting with joy. But her face looked as if she had nothing to say at all.

Why?

She was so excited yesterday.

Why?

I could only think of one possibility.

I waited for Meg in the hallway while she changed into street clothes. I really hate this kind of thing.

Meg trudged down the hall. She wasn't walking like she had just gotten the promotion of her dreams. She noticed me and stopped walking.

I've got to tell her. I've got to ask. I've got to find out.

"Um, Meg? You know, what you were saying yesterday...."

"Never mind. I'm not going to do it."

Meg sadly lowered her glance to the ground, a look that spoke of a girl with a broken heart.

I knew it....

"Did you know? About us?"

"No."

"I'm sorry.... I'm sorry.... I'm so sorry...."

All I could do was apologize. I kept it a secret for so long that now I had deeply hurt her. My reticence had broken her heart. I kept apologizing. As my voice grew high-pitched, tears welled-up in my eyes. That was all I could do.

I guess I must have looked pretty funny because Meg burst out laughing.

"It's OK. It doesn't hurt as much as I thought it would," she said, holding her chest. I knew just how much it hurt. She was only cheerfully laughing for me. I couldn't stand it. *I can't stand it, Meg.*

"Don't cry so much. You've got to take care of your beautiful face."

"Meg...."

"Oh, yeah. I've gotta go tell that idiot that I got promoted. He may be an idiot, but he'll probably at least congratulate me, right?"

The smile that spread across her face seemed like that of the same old Meg.

Fragment 10: Haruka Shitow

I drove along in my car.

I had always been running. I heard from Yagumo that Ayato found out about the MU Phase Response. At the time I was too busy to make time to meet with him. I was constantly meeting with people and gathering information about Maya.

I knew that was just an excuse.

If I had wanted to see him, I could have; if I had wanted to talk to him, I could have. But I didn't. I was afraid. I was afraid to show my face to Ayato. Afraid of my sins being discovered. I didn't know what to say when he discovered what I had done.

But I couldn't run any longer. Too much time had passed.

And the investigation of Maya that I had been using as an excuse had come to the end of the first stage.

I finally found Ayato lying in a field next to the road. It was so hot. He looked as if he wished his body were ice and he would melt into the ground.

I stopped my car by the levee. Having a car really came in handy at times like these, because it meant that we could be alone ... but the heavy silence that hung around us felt like a third person.

"Get in," I said.

He complied silently.

"I like the ocean," Ayato mumbled quietly, breaking the long silence.

"Can you not trust me, either?" I boldly asked him, but he

wouldn't give me a straight answer.

"It's so vast; it seems to go on forever."

I knew it. He can't trust me, either.

"The waves crash and recede. For all eternity ... even after I die."

I couldn't believe what he had just said. I looked at him. His elbow was propped up on a knee and rested his cheeks on his hand, looking out the window. His back seemed to be rejecting me.

"You knew, didn't you?"

I told him I did; it was all I could say.

"But you're you, right?"

"That's just what Yagumo said."

"It's nothing to worry about. If we're worried about something little like this, what will we do when the absolute barrier comes down? How will we shake hands with the people of Tokyo? It really doesn't matter whether you're a MU or a human."

"The ocean reaches all the way to Tokyo, doesn't it?"

Our words were different. Our thoughts were different. Why did this have to happen?

"What's wrong? Can't things just be the way they are now? We've always gotten along fine, haven't we?"

I tried to grab his hand, without even thinking. The second I reached for it, he pulled his whole body sharply away from me.

"Stop it!"

The words stung.

"You've always tricked me just like this, haven't you?"

It felt like he had stabbed me. So, that was what he thought. That

was how he felt.

"You told me you'd show me the truth. Then you took me out of Tokyo and hid the truth from me. I ... if I had known it would be like this I would have been better off staying in Tokyo!"

Ayato slowly looked toward me. His face seemed to tremble with deep sorrow. Had I really hurt him so deeply? A desperate smile slowly spread across his face.

"You ... you're a liar."

I felt like my heart break into a million little pieces.

He slipped through my fingers and dashed out of the car.

I could see him running away in my rearview mirror. But I couldn't move. I couldn't call his name; couldn't stop him.

I was frozen in place, bleeding invisible blood from wounds both he and I had made.

It was too late. It was too late for anything now. All the strength flowed from my body; my neck bent as if broken and I banged my head against the steering wheel, not feeling the pain of the action, not feeling anything except the yawning emptiness that Ayato had left behind.

"You...." *You*. I had never known that such a simple word could feel so hurtful.

4

I ran. I ran from the fake me, from the fake Haruka.

So, everyone knew. Everyone knew that my memories were created. That was even worse than hearing that I was a Mulian.

I ran. I kept running.

Where was I headed? I didn't know.

Why? I didn't know.

I remembered the time that I ran away from everything under the attack of a Dolem's mind rays. That reality was a fantasy. But this reality.... No matter how far I ran, it would never be a fantasy. My life would always be a lie.

So all I could do was run.

Fragment 11: Itsuki Kisaragi

Haruka paid me a rare visit. She looked depressed. I didn't know why she was there, but there was a part of me that was happy just because she had come to see me. I thought I had some Whittard or Fortnum & Mason left.

I brewed some tea and headed back to the living room. There Haruka was staring at the pile of cardboard boxes in the corner of the room.

"Oh, this? My sister is moving, so she's packing."

"Ayato might move somewhere, too."

"Even with kids, there's a lot of packing to do."

"What should I do?"

"If I don't do it, they won't do anything themselves."

Yes. I was just making excuses for my uselessness.

"If I had known, I could have stopped him."

I didn't know what to do, so I just started packing. It was all I could do. All I could do was pack up all the things that Quon probably wouldn't even take with her.

"I know."

"Know what?"

"That she's not your sister. That she's just like Ayato...."

Man, these people from the information offices.... They could find anything out if they looked for it.

"That's true. But they're still family."

"They're family, huh? I didn't think you were that strong, Itsuki."

"I became strong. I had no choice."

I really did have no other choice. I was not doing this because I liked it. It seemed to be my fate and I had accepted that.

"I want to become strong, too."

She whispered the words. My heart ached.

Haruka, I know. I know who you want to become strong for. You are rightly trying to hide it, but it doesn't take an information officer to figure it out.

5

When I got home, there was someone playing shogi with my uncle on the porch. It was Quon. Why was she here? Uncle was sitting there, thinking with his arms crossed.

"Hey, you're back. This girl is really good. A little too good."

"Ollin ... it's today."

What's today?

"All right, then. I'm going to go see an old friend."

Uncle, you don't have to leave on my behalf.

"If you're going to go out, make sure to lock the door."

What's the old man going on about?

"I'm not going to go out."

"Just if. Just make sure."

Uncle left for somewhere. *I'm not going anywhere. Because there is nowhere else for me to go.*

Quon giggled.

"What are you laughing at?"

"Because I got to see Ollin."

"You know, too, don't you. That's why you're laughing."

"La?"

"I'm a Mulian. My memories have been created and changed, and I have blue blood!"

"Then I am the same."

She stated it flatly. Why must she mock me like this?

"My blood is also blue."

Huh? What can that mean? But ... but....

"Then why does Itsuki call you his sister?" I burst out.

"Take me there," she suddenly demanded.

"Everyone talked to you normally."

"They're calling me," Quon said.

"How can they act normally?" I asked, desperation in my voice.

"To Tokyo."

What did she just say? To Tokyo?

"I want you to take me to Tokyo."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because of the absolute barrier," I snapped, losing patience.

"Why not? We got out, didn't we? If we got out, that means we can get back in. Why not?"

Quon said it simply. So simply it was almost laughable.

I had never even thought of that. Haruka told me it was impossible and I believed her....

No. I didn't want to go home. I destroyed a Dolem and saw Tokyo Jupiter beyond it. At that time I should have been able to go back if I had wanted to. But I didn't. Because I liked it here; because I wanted to be in Niraikanai.

What about now? I didn't know anymore.

We should go back to Tokyo. Let's try to go back. To where it all began. To where my mother is.

"OK."

Fragment 12: Haruka Shitow

Itsuki took me to the Neriya Shrine.

I was sure that Ayato was going to go somewhere. That he was going to return to Tokyo. The only place for him besides here, besides this island, was Tokyo. Itsuki was sure, too, that Quon was going to go somewhere. Because Maya Kamina was calling to her.

And then they both appeared.

"Are you already headed off?"

Itsuki spoke as if seeing his family off on a day trip.

"They're calling me."

"I see."

"Itsuki!"

How could he just accept it like that? Weren't we going to stop them?

"Can't you let her go?"

I couldn't say anything after I looked into his eyes filled with sorrow, defeat, and love. But I didn't want to let Ayato go. Never.

"Ayato! Why?"

"I'm sorry."

If you feel sorry about it, then you shouldn't have decided to go to Tokyo in the first place.

"Don't apologize."

"I'm sorry."

There he goes again! I don't want to hear those words. I want to hear him say "I'm not going to go". That he wants to be here. By my side!

"You want to watch to the end," Itsuki said quietly. "You want to watch everything with your own eyes."

Really? Ayato....

"I don't know what I will see there. But I'm going to try to accept everything. I want to decide, having accepted it."

Ayato stared at me.

"Decide whether I want to live as a Mulian ... or come back as a human."

His cheeks became hot with anger.

Was he still hung up on that? If I had been worried about that, I would have given up on everything when I first saw him in Tokyo. What did the MU Phase Response matter? Who cared about fake memories? I... I...

I reached out and cradled his face.

A dry sound echoed through the vast open space of the shrine.

Ayato looked stunned as I held his reddened cheeks.

My palms ached like my heart.

"You will come back here, you know! Not because you are a human or because you are a MU... but as *you*!"

If I can't stop you, at least come back. Come back here. To this island. To where I am.

"You are different from Yagumo, aren't you, Haruka?"

It hit me hard, but it made me happy.

"You have to go?" I asked sadly.

"I'm sorry."

"I understand. I trust you."

"I may betray that trust."

"I will still trust you. Is that wrong?"

Don't let the tears fall. Don't let them fall now. Let me have that much dignity.

"Itsuki," Ayato called to him in a hoarse voice.

"I will protect your sister. So ... protect Haruka for me."

They're going to fall. Hearing those words....

The tears are going to fall from the bottom of my heart.

"Look after my sister."

"Let's go, Ollin," Quon urged him, and he walked away. He walked past me, then stopped for a moment, grasped my hand and quietly whispered...

"Thank you."

"Don't..."

Don't. Don't. Don't.... Don't say any more or I will try to stop

you. Screaming, sobbing, sniffing, I will stop you.

Ayato slowly relaxed his hand and then squeezed mine tightly, entwining his fingers with mine.

I could feel his warmth through his FH suit glove. It was there. I etched that feeling into my memory so it would leave a deep impression.

"I'll be back."

"Come back soon," I whispered.

Ayato slowly pulled his hand away and left with Quon, heading toward where the Rahxephon stood waiting.

I can't look back.

I could his receding footsteps as he walked away. I was trying to feel the last hint of his presence. But that, too, soon disappeared. He climbed into the Rahxephon.

"Is it OK?" Itsuki gently asked me.

"Yeah."

"If you're OK with it ... I have altered the data and sent it to the Command Center. No one knows what is happening here right now. So you never came here. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"You really haven't changed, have you? Still as awkward as ever."

I really *was* awkward. All I could do was sit there, crying.

Fragment 13: Megumi Shitow

Where did that idiot wander off to?

It's practically nighttime.

I looked all over the island, but he's nowhere to be found.

He's usually around somewhere, but now that I really want him here he's gone.

Even though I want to tell him directly myself!

"Argh! I give up! I give up looking for that idiot!"

I called his cell with mine.

The sound of ringing echoed in my ears.

I thought he finally had picked up, but it was the voice mail message.

"Ayato? Geez, where are you?"

I couldn't do anything about the harsh tone of my voice.

"It's me. Uh ... um...."

I left a message and hung up the phone.

Just then, I heard a loud explosion above Neriya Shrine.

And then I saw something rising, leaving a tail of light in its wake as it disappeared in the midnight blue sky.

That was...

The Rahxephon...

It's Ayato.

The Rahxephon, shining, as it flew up into the night sky.

My heart sunk into the abyss.

Fragment 14: Hiroko Asahina

"Oh."

I suddenly felt pressure on my chest and crouched down by the side of the road.

"What's wrong?"

Mamoru looked at me worriedly.

"It's Ayato...."

"Ayato?"

"He may be coming back."

"What are you talking about?"

"I just suddenly got a feeling."

"Are you sure there wasn't just something wrong with that hamburger you ate?"

"No, it's not that...."

But as I said that, the strong conviction I had felt rapidly faded.

I guess I was wrong.

By the time I stood up, it was no longer a conviction, but a small, shaky feeling.

I glanced at Mamoru and saw that he looked stern.

Why was he looking like that?

6

I commanded the Rahxephon to let Quon ride on its knees.

This is how it should be.

This is what I have to do.

Don't look down.

Don't look at Niraikanai.

The tears may overflow if I look.

Goodbye, Niraikanai.

Goodbye, my reality.

Goodbye, everyone.

Goodbye ... Haruka.



Afterword

Hiroshi Oonogi

There is naturally also a description of it in the novel, but the song that Quon hums in the TV version is "The Polovtsian Dance."

The version that I like is "The Polovtsian Dance" sung by Izzy. That version is the song called "Song of Our Homeland" featured on her album *Ascolta*.

Izzy's rendition of "The Polovtsian Dance" is superb. Her sweet, clear voice stimulates the listener's senses.

The song itself is also excellent and stays with you for a while after hearing it. It probably stayed with those of you who watched it on TV. Perhaps some of you even found yourselves humming it the next day.

At least I know *I* did.

The day after Quon sang it, I noticed I kept humming it while working (of course, I'm not as good; I'm essentially tone-deaf, so I was humming out of tune, but still). One day I happened to hum it in front of a friend of mine. That friend said, "Isn't that 'The Polovtsian Dance'? Do you know the parody version?"

"Polovtsiaaan, my dad's Polovtsiaaan, my son's Polovtsiaaan, and I aaam Polovtsian."

That was the song he sang to me.

Since then, I've been in hell. Every time I think of the melody, when the refrain comes around in my head, it's not Izzy's lovely voice, it's my friend's thick voice singing "Polovtsiaaan...." Augh! Give me back my beautiful music!

If you have read this far, perhaps you are now in the same hell that I am. Can you hear it in the back of your mind?

“Polovtsiaaan, my dad's Polovtsiaaan, my son's Polovtsiaaan, and I aaam Polovtsian....”

--Hiroshi Ohnogi

To be continued in volume 4...



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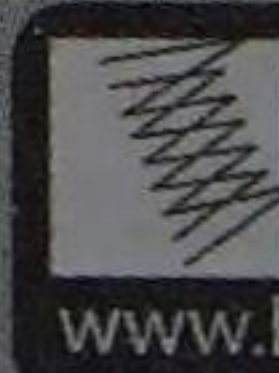
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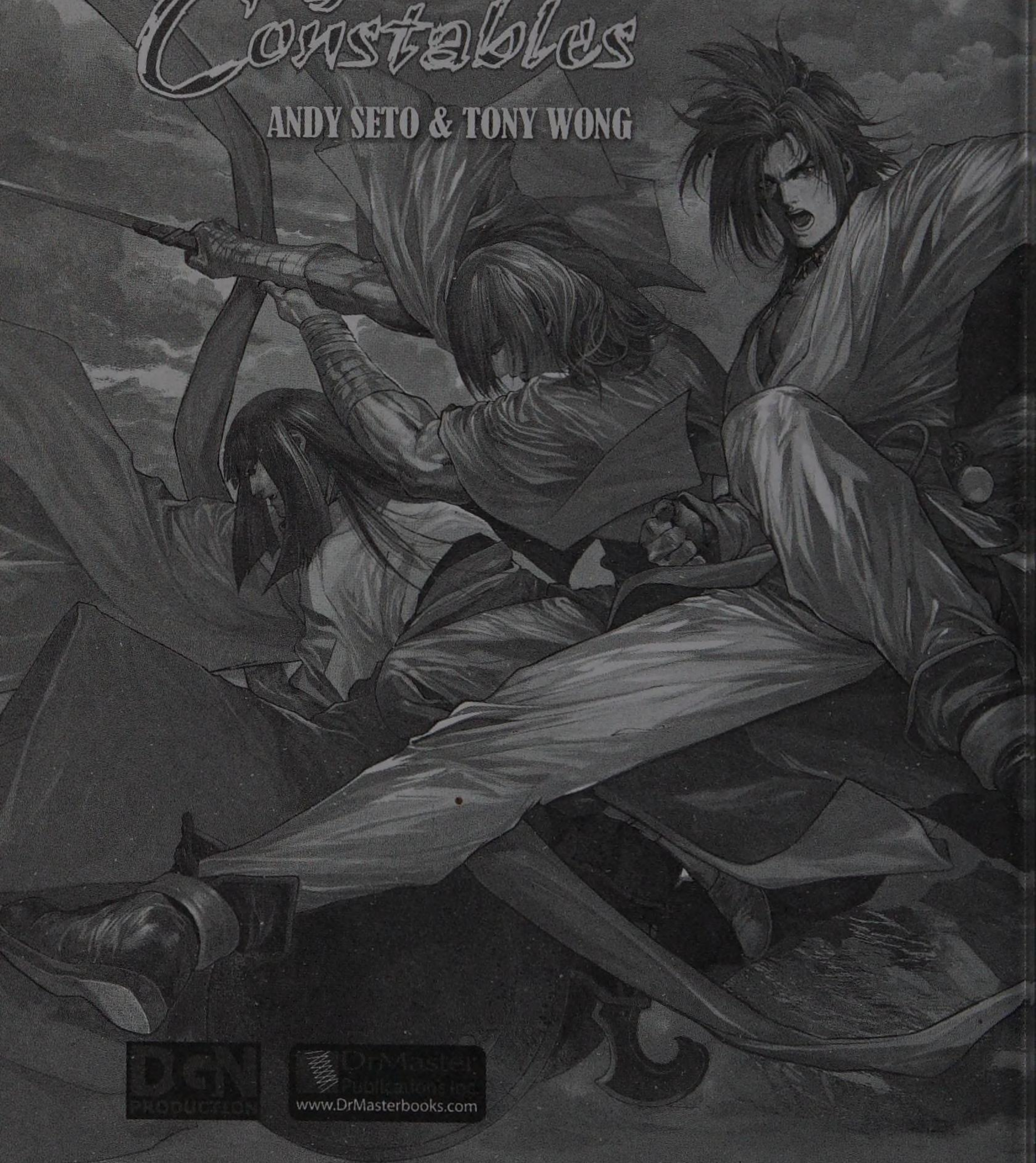


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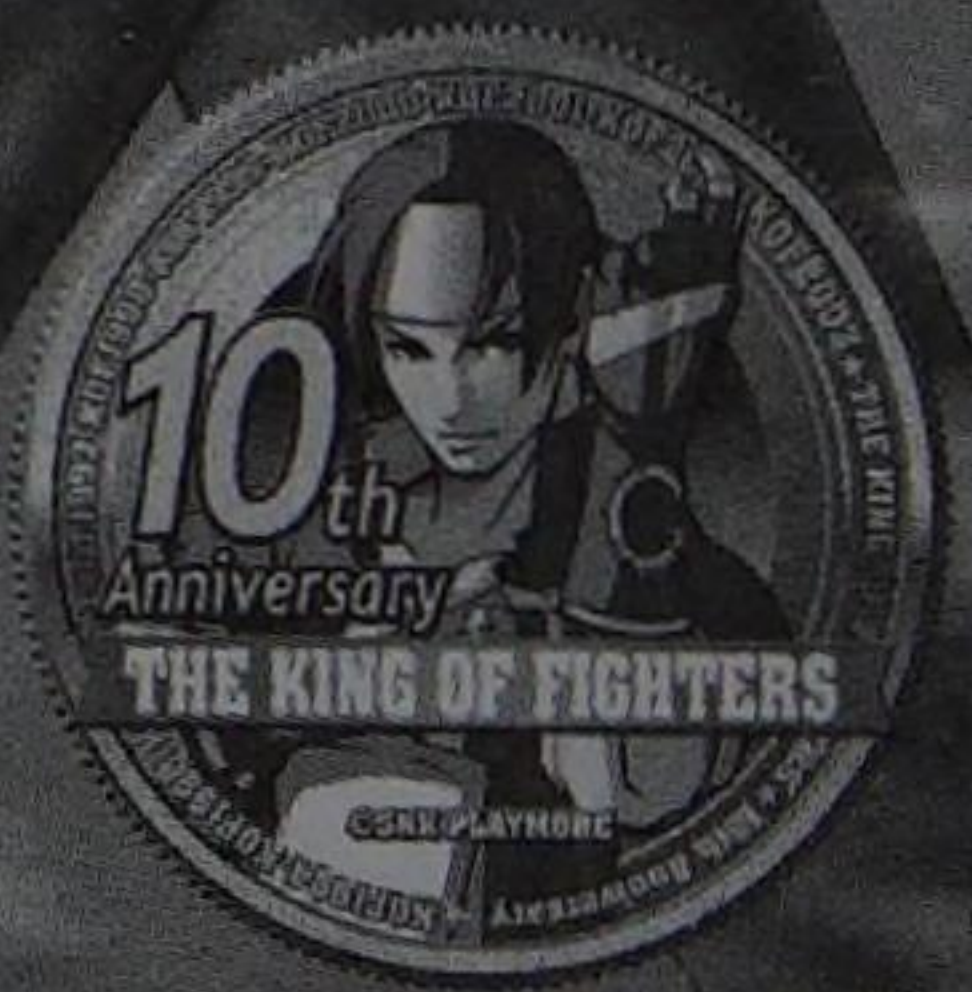
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NOVEL



In the third installation of the novelization of the popular anime, Rahxephon, Ayato suddenly finds himself back inside Tokyo Jupiter. There he sees his old friends, Mamoru and Hiroko. But something is not right. Bewildered, he wanders around in a world that is the embodiment of his own desires.

Elsewhere, Quon awakens from her sleep, and it is decided she will be put in the care of the Bähbem Foundation. Reika makes an appearance, as do the Vermillion, TERRA's newest military technology; human specimen number one; and Isshiki, Itsuki, and Helena's past. Everyone is moving closer to the truth.

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